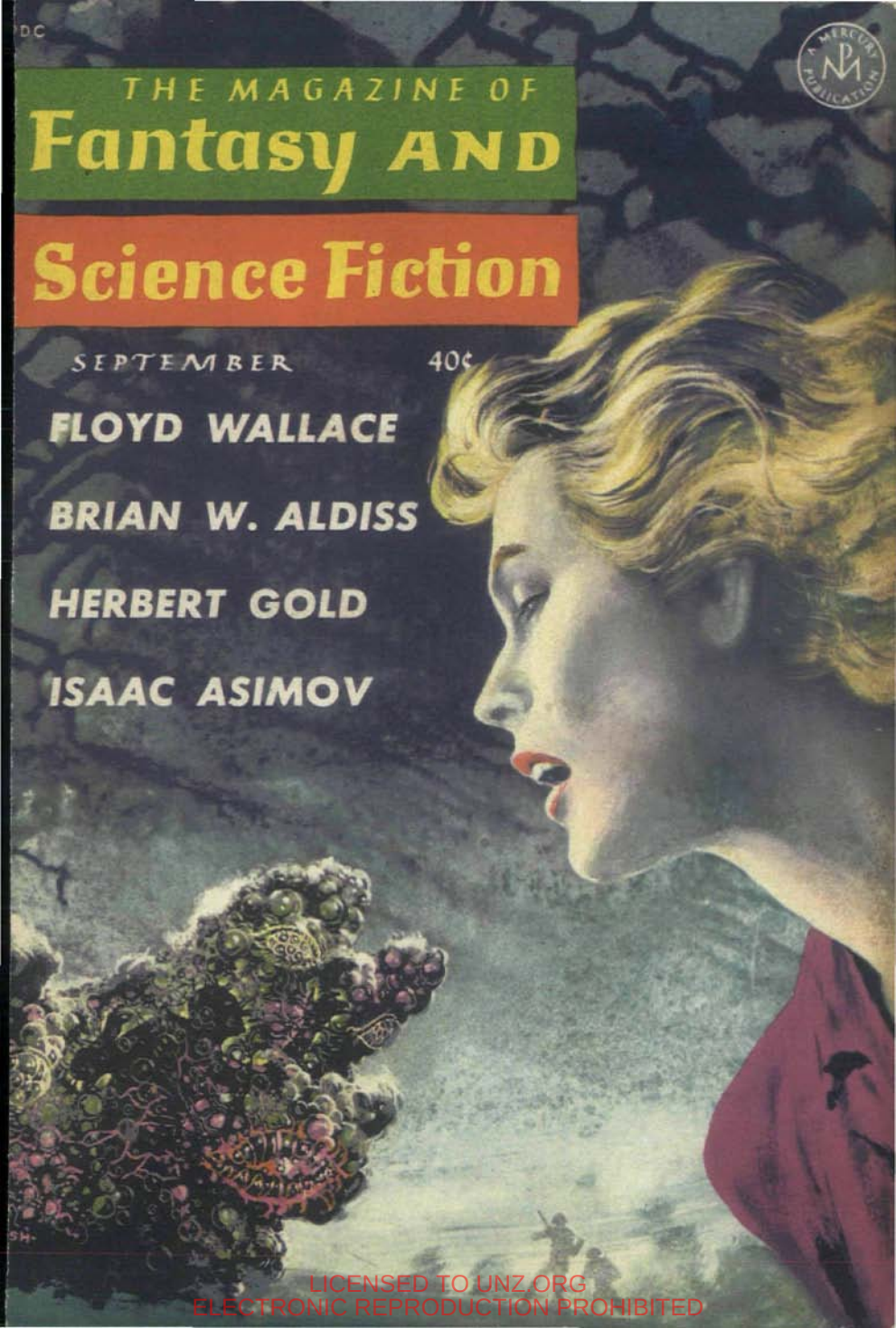

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

SEPTEMBER *Including Venture Science Fiction*

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(illustrating "The Monster in the Park")

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In this issue . . .

Our lead story this month is by a young Frenchman who is presently a soldier in Algeria, with two more years of military service ahead of him. He has published often in France, but this is his first appearance in the United States. May it, we say, not be his last. . . .

The Good Doctor Asimov wishes to offer an addendum:

"In the wake of my article "Four Steps to Salvation" (F&SF, June, 1961) a number of Gentle Readers wrote in to ask, "What about the Incas?" Now I intended the article to be controversial, but I also intended to leave myself fighting arguments.

I knew that our records of ancient writing did not extend back as far as our records of ancient agriculture, even though one of my theses was that writing preceded agriculture. I was all set to counter objections by saying there must have been some form of primitive writing (or "proto-writing") that preceded agriculture and of which we have lost the record. It's not a good argument but to me it seems conceivable.

However, as the Readers pointed out, the Incas had agriculture and quite a few other things but had *no writing*. They did have some sort of knotted string to aid the memory but when I suggested this as a form of proto-writing to one Reader, the very suggestion was firmly rejected.

So, although I still feel there is no argument concerning the importance of communication in the history of man's progress, I had better not be so cavalier about writing bringing about agriculture and the Neolithic Revolution.

Only, if writing didn't do it, what did? After many thousands and thousands of years during which man lived the life of the hunter, what suddenly impelled him to tame animals and plants and settle down to village life? Could it have been some kindly extra-terrestrial on a missionary journey of education?"

Coming next month . . .

A special All Star Anniversary issue, featuring the beginning of a two-part serial by Gordon R. Dickson . . . "Naked to the Stars." It is an adventurous, yet thoughtful, tale of war and soldiers of the future, and we doubt that you'll want to stop after reading the first half. . . . Also on hand for this or early issues are stories by Isaac Asimov, Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth, Kurt Vonnegut, Fritz Leiber, Jay Williams, James Blish, Charles G. Finney, and others.

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Another entry from the French edition of F&SF, which, under the skillful editorial direction of Maurice Renault, uses stories from the U.S. edition as well as some original contributions from French authors. M. Klein here tells of a monster born under another sun who lands in a city park . . . and of human love.

THE MONSTER IN THE PARK

by Gerard Klein

(translated by Virginia Kidd)

NIGHT WAS DECIDING TO FALL, just in equilibrium on the edge of the horizon, ready to clamp down again like a pot-lid on the city, setting in motion in its fall the precise clockwork of lights. The day was ended, and a rain of footsteps beat upon the dusty asphalt of the streets. It was just at the peaceful moment of homecoming that the news broke.

"We repeat that there is not any danger," the loudspeaker was saying to Marion, seated in her kitchen with her hands linked around her knees, looking out the window at the freshly clipped grass, the pale enclosure of the garden, and the road. "We ask merely that residents of the neighborhoods near the park kindly stay home so as not to impede the experts in their plan of action. The thing from another world is not in any way hostile to humans. This is a historic day when we can welcome a being from another planet. According to the eminent professor who stands beside me at this very moment, it was certainly born under the light of some other sun."

Marion rose and opened the window. She inhaled air charged with the odors of grass and water-spray and little stinging knives of cold. She stared at the dark and distant corner where the street erupted from between the steep cliffs of apartment buildings and widened to encompass brick dwellings and their lawns. A single window streamed light on the façade of each of these houses, and behind almost every one of

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these windows Marion could make out the silhouette of the one who was waiting. And the shadows leaning on their elbows at the window sills disappeared one by one, while the footsteps of their men resounded in the street, keys slid into well-oiled locks and doors slammed, closing out the finished day and the night quite fallen.

"Nothing is going to happen to him," Marion said to herself, thinking of Bernard, who must cross the park if he came home as he usually did by the shortest and pleasantest route. Smoothing her dark hair she threw a quick glance at the mirror. She was small and demurely round and melting sweet as ice cream.

"Nothing is going to happen, to him," Marion said, looking in the direction of the park, between the lit checkerboards of the building fronts, straining to make out the compact and somber mass of the trees, relieved by no other light than that of automobile headlights in passing. "Surely he took some other route."

But in spite of herself she was imagining Bernard walking the gravelly paths with nonchalant steps, between the shaped shadows of yews and the trembling poplars, under the diffused brightness of the moon, winding between the wickets which edge the grass like iron eyelashes. He would be holding his newspaper in his hand and whistling perhaps, or smoking a half-extinguished pipe, with shallow whiffs of the light smoke, his eyes slightly narrowed, his bearing faintly cocky as if he would take anybody on. And a big black claw was bestirring itself in the thicket, or a long tentacle was coiling itself in a ditch, ready to crack through the air like a whip-lash and strike him down. She was watching them, her eyes closed, on the verge of hailing him to cry terror, but she was doing nothing because it was only an illusion displaced by the confident words on the radio.

"The necessary precautions have been taken. Entrances to the park are being watched. Anyone out for a late stroll is being escorted individually as far as his door. We are only asking you to avoid all noise, and, preferably, all light in the vicinity of the park, to the simple end that we not frighten our guest from another world. Contact has not yet been made. No one can say what form it may have, nor even guess what may be the number of its eyes. But we are stationed at the main gate of the park and we shall keep you informed. Besides me stands Professor Hermant of the Institute for Space Research, who will give you the result of his first observations. Professor, I am turning the mike over to you . . ."

Marion thought about the thing come from space, that solitary be-

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ing crouched in some corner of the park, bellied down against the humid earth, shivering in the chill of this alien wind, searching the sky through a gap in the underbrush, and what stars it saw new and unfamiliar. By the vibrations of the ground it would perceive the footsteps of the men who were encircling it, the thrummings of motors, and more deeply, the subterranean ground-bass of the city.

"What should I do in its place?" Marion asked herself, and she knew that everything was going to be all right because the voice on the radio was serious and soothing, and as assured as that of a preacher heard on a Sunday whose words hardly break the silence. She knew that the men were advancing toward this being trembling in the glare of the headlights, and that it would wait, calm and confident, for them to hold out their hands and speak, and that it would come a little way toward them, a point of anguish in its soul, and then comprehend suddenly by dint of listening to their incomprehensible voices—just as, one year earlier, she had listened to Bernard's voice.

"Our instruments have hardly grazed the immense reaches of space which surround us," said the professor's voice. "Think: at this very instant while I am speaking to you, we are plunging across cosmic stretches, between stars, among clouds of hydrogen . . ."

He was silent a moment and then caught his breath.

". . . Anything, therefore, can await us on the other side of this door of mystery which is the void. And lo! it has been breached and entered by a being come here from some other world. One hour and forty-seven minutes ago, a space ship landed silently in the park of this city. Our detectors had picked it up an hour and a half earlier when it plunged into the outermost layers of the atmosphere. It seems to be of small dimensions. It is still too soon to issue any formal statement as to the source of its propulsive energy. My distinguished colleague, Professor Li, estimates that the apparatus could be moved by a directed spatial asymmetry, but researches undertaken along this line . . ."

"Professor," cut in the voice of the announcer, "certain people have advanced the hypothesis that it is not a ship we have here, but only a being capable of moving itself about among the stars. What do you think of this idea?"

"Ah well, it is still too soon to venture any definite opinion. No one has yet seen the object and we know only that it seemed capable of directing and checking its fall. We do not even know if it really contains a living creature. It is possible that we have here only a machine, some sort of robot, if you please. But, in any event, it

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contains a message of the deepest scientific interest. This is the greatest scientific event since the discovery of fire, by our remote ancestors. From this moment on, we know that we are no longer alone in a star-strewn immensity. In order to answer your question, frankly, I do not believe that an unprotected creature, alive in any sense in which we understand the term, could survive the conditions of space: the absence of atmosphere, of heat and of weight; or survive the destructive radiations."

"Professor, do you think that there is the least danger?"

"Sincerely, no. This thing has not manifested any hostile intention. It had contented itself with staying where it landed, in a corner of the park. I am amazed at the promptness with which the necessary precautions have been taken, but I do not think that they will contribute anything. My principal uneasiness stems rather from the reactions men might have face to—face—with a being irretrievably alien. That is why I am asking everyone to stay calm, whatever happens. As of this moment, the scientific authorities have the situation well in hand. Surely nothing disagreeable can happen . . ."

Marion took a cigarette from a drawer and lit it, rather maladroitly. It was a gesture she had not made for some years, perhaps since her fifteenth birthday. She inhaled some smoke, and coughed. Her fingers were trembling. She flicked away a bit of white ash which had fallen on her dress.

"What shall we eat tonight?" she murmured, scolding herself for being so upset. But she lacked the courage to lift down a frying pan out of the cupboard, or even to open the refrigerator. She put out the light and then came back to the window, puffing at her cigarette like a little girl. She strained to hear the noise of footfalls on the road. But there was nothing to hear except calm voices in calm houses, only a muffled sound of music like the bee-song within a bee-hive, and the purring of words from the loudspeaker.

"Keep calm," she said out loud, biting her lips. "Some thousands of people went into the park this evening; nothing happened to them. And nothing will happen to him. Things never happen to people one knows—only to faraway faces on a screen or in the papers, people with wildly unlikely names."

The clock struck eight. "Perhaps I could telephone to the office," Marion thought. "Perhaps they will be keeping him down there half the night." But, because they had no telephone, it would have entailed throwing a coat around her, stepping out into the dark and running through the

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cold. Then she would have to walk through a café full of curious faces, take down from the hook her pet abomination, the buzzing inanimate receiver, and then invoke him with her altered metallic voice, all the while tearing the handkerchief in her pocket to shreds. That was what she ought to do. That is what an independent and courageous woman would do. But she was not, she thought, now full of shame; neither independent nor courageous. She knew only how to wait and look at the sparkling city while her eyes were brimming over with nightmares.

"I thank you, Professor," said the radio. "We are now four hundred meters at most from the spot where the being remains hidden. The men in the special brigades are progressing slowly, studying every square centimeter of the terrain. I can't make out anything yet, ah yes, a black form—vaguely spherical—on the other side of the lake, a little taller than a man, perhaps. It is very, very dark, and . . . The park is absolutely deserted. The ambassador from the stars is therefore lonely now, but never fear, you will soon have the chance to make his acquaintance . . ."

Marion let her cigarette fall and watched it burning itself out on the clean tile floor. Bernard was not in the park. Perhaps he was approaching with long strides, or perhaps he was still prowling near the railings of the park, trying to catch a glimpse of the visitor from the stars. In a quarter of an hour, he would be here, smiling, his hair gleaming with droplets of mist.

Then her former anguish surged up from some damp, dark interior emptiness. "But why don't they advance more quickly?" she thought, musing on those men who were working in the darkness, measuring, weighing, analysing, progressing without noise in the night like moles come up out of their holes. "Why don't they advance more quickly if there isn't any danger?"

It came into her mind that they were hiding something behind the calm screen of the loudspeaker. Their words seemed over-charged with confidence. She thought suddenly that perhaps they were trembling while they spoke, perhaps their hands were clenched convulsively on the mike while they put on a show of being sure of themselves. Perhaps their faces were horribly pale despite the rosy glow of the shrouded lanterns. She told herself that they knew not one thing more than she did on the subject of just what it might be that wandered down there in the atmosphere of earth.

And she thought that they would do nothing for Bernard,

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that only she could make a gesture, (although she could not think what gesture). Perhaps run to meet him, throw herself into his arms and press herself against him, perhaps to entice him far from this abominable being from the stars? Or perhaps simply wait on a white metal kitchen chair, and go on weeping, immobile, like a silhouette cut out of black paper.

She was incapable of thinking of any other thing. She no longer wanted to hear the voice which emanated from the radio, but she dared not turn it off for fear of being still more alone. She took up a magazine and opened it at hazard, but she had never really liked to read, and now it would have been necessary to spell out letter after letter, her eyes were so fogged; and in any case the worn-out words no longer made any sense to her. She tried looking at the pictures, but she saw them as if through a water-drop or a prism in a strangely dislocated transparency, scattered along impossible lines.

Then she heard a footstep. She rose and ran to the door, opened it, and leaned out toward the night, toward the dusky humid grass-plot, and listened. But the step hesitated, stopped, took up again in the wrong direction, and died away altogether.

She went back into the kitchen and the sound of the station struck her as unendurable. She lowered the volume and inclined her ear close against the speaker, listening through the mass of her hair to this miniscule voice, this insect harping on its vibrating membrane.

"Attention," said a voice at the other end of a long shivering glass tube. "Something's happening. I think the creature's moving. The men are perhaps two hundred meters from it, at the most. I hear a sort of cry. Perhaps the creature is going to speak . . . it's calling out . . . its voice seems almost human . . . like a long sigh . . . I'll see if I can pick it up for you."

Marion pressed her ear against the radio until she could feel strands of her own hair pressing against her skin. She heard a series of clicks, a long muted buzzing, a sharp whistling, and silence. Then the voice issued forth from the depths of the loudspeaker, barely audible, profound as the heavy breathing of someone asleep.

"MA-riON," said the voice, nestled in the pit of the loudspeaker, crouching in a dark corner of the park.

It was Bernard's voice.

She rose abruptly; the chair see-sawed behind her and toppled with a great crash.

"MA-riON," imperceptibly murmured the voice, both alien and well known. But she heard it

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no longer. She was running on the road, having left behind her the gaping door and all her deathly anguish. She went past two gardens running, and then she stopped for a second, winded and shivering with cold. It was dark all around. House shutters were closed and let filter through only pencil stripes of light. The street lamps were out. She began to walk in the middle of the road, where she would not risk stumbling on a pebble or falling into a puddle, and found she walked through unaccustomed silence. One time and another it was punctuated, but only by a muffled barking, or the metallic tumult of a train. She saw her path would intercept with that of a man who sang as he walked, as black as a statue chiselled out of a block of anthracite. She wanted to stop him and ask him to accompany her, but on closer approach she saw that he was drunk and made a detour around him.

She had the impression of being lost in a hostile city although she knew every one of these houses and a hundred times by day, while strolling along with Bernard, had criticized the curtains of each of these windows.

Now she was running again, between large buildings as between the ranks of trees that hem in a forest path. And she was sure that she would hear behind her the breathing of a ferocious animal, if she stopped. She crossed a deserted place, a glade in cement, that the night covered over again with an awning pierced with pinholes for the starry spots. She arrived at the boundary of the park and began to run the length of the railing, counting the bars.

Her heels struck the asphalt with a clear ringing sound but fear crawled the length of her flesh like an army of ants. She held her breath. The moon threw before her a tenuous, impalpable shadow.

She spun around, making her skirts fly out. There was nothing behind her but the enfilade of night walls, without relief or nuance, like great lava-flows devouring all light and all color, transforming the night into a gulf and the edge of the pavement into a tight-rope on which she had run, light and numb with anguish and with cold. She was alone with the night.

A hand took her by the shoulder and slewed her around. She cried out. The hand let go, and she recoiled as far as the wall of the park and pressed her shoulders against the bars and threw out her hands before her.

"Excuse me, ma'am," said the policeman in a voice that was heavy and stumbling but strangely reassuring. "They've asked everybody to stay close to home. Have you a radio?"

"Yes," whispered Marion, with

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effort, without budging, without breathing, not even actually parting her lips.

"You want me to walk you back to your house? There isn't very much danger, out here, but . . ." He hesitated. His face was pallid in the obscurity. A tic periodically convulsed his cheek. ". . . A man got trapped, just now, and it would be better. . . ."

"Bernard," said Marion, her fingers spread very wide and pressed against the folds of her dress.

"It wasn't pretty," murmured the policeman. "It would be better if you came with me. Hurry, ma'am. I have to complete my patrol. You don't live very far away, I hope. This is an extraordinary patrol. I'm not used to walking alone, you know. But they're short-handed this evening. And now the thing is calling!"

With the tip of his shoe, he crushed a half-smoked, water-soaked cigarette; the paper shredded and the tobacco spilled out.

"My husband," said Marion.

"Oh, now, come on. He's waiting for you at home."

"No," said Marion, shaking her head, and her hair fell down over her face like a fine black mesh. "He is there in the park. I heard him."

"There is nobody in the park." The tic reappeared and twisted his cheek. Marion saw that his whole lower face was trembling slightly. His left hand was stroking his leather belt and his right hand grazed the waxed sheath of his revolver. He was more afraid than she was. He feared for himself.

"Don't you hear?" she cried. "Don't you understand?" She hurled herself toward him and gripped his arm. She wanted to claw this white and quivering face, this human false-front—himself as white as the façade of the city was black.

"My husband is down there, and he's calling me. I heard his voice on the radio. Why won't you leave me alone?"

Without her being able to prevent it, tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"Oh, let me go!" she moaned.

He balanced himself an instant on the squared-off ends of his shoes that were so black and glistening with polish.

"Perhaps," he said, hesitating. "Perhaps. I don't know." Then, more softly:

"Excuse me, ma'am. Come with me."

They were walking the length of the railings. She was running before him on the tips of her toes, and every four or five steps had to stop and wait for him.

"Hurry," she said. "For the love of God, hurry."

"Don't make so much noise,

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ma'am! It isn't so far away, and it seems that it has keen hearing. Soon now we are going to hear *it.*"

"I know," she said. "It is the voice of my husband."

He looked at her fixedly, making no sound.

"It has eaten him," she said again. "I know it. I saw it. It has big pointed teeth, and they are like steel. I heard them grind together. It was frightful."

Abruptly she began to weep again. Her shoulders were racked by her sobs.

"Calm yourself. Nothing can happen to you."

"No," she admitted. "No. Not any more."

But hiccups chopped off her voice, and the tears obscured her sight while she was running. She slipped and one of her pumps flew into the air. She cast the other one with a single hasty motion of her foot, and continued to run in stocking feet.

Suddenly she heard the voice of the monster, and the lips she saw moving were Bernard's. It was a prolonged and tranquil sound, in no way terrible, but so weak that she wanted to cup it in her hand to protect it from the wind.

She saw men dressed in dark blue who were guarding the entrance to the park. Motionless, she waited out the exchange of questions and answers issuing insensibly, without emphasis, from between tight lips. She entered the park. She saw the net of strands of copper that they had woven, the gilded threads seining the land, surrounding the alien creature that spoke with Bernard's voice.

She could feel the dampness of grass beneath her feet.

"Who are you?" whispered a voice.

"I came to . . ." she began, but she was listening to the distant voice.

"MA-riON. MA-riON."

"Don't you hear it?" she said almost expressionlessly.

"I have been hearing it for an hour already," said the man. He played the beam of his flash over Marion. The buttons of his uniform gleamed and so did his teeth. His narrow moustache gave the impression that he smiled all the time, but his eyes, at that moment, were desperate.

"It pronounces sounds from here, earthly words that it dredged out of that poor fellow it swallowed up, words without order, without sense. At first, we believed that it was a man who was calling. Then we realized that no mouth on earth had such a voice as that."

"It is Bernard's voice," she said. "Bernard is my husband. We were married a year ago next month."

"Who are you? Your name?"

She let herself sink to the grass,

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and, not to hear the voice any longer, encircled her head with her arms.

"*Marion,*" repeated the voice, insistently. This could not be a man's voice, because it was too penetrating. It seemed to come up from the bottom of a well, or out of the depths of a kiln. It seemed to be stitched into the fabric of the earth. It appeared to rise out of the ground, like the voice that grass might have or the shrilling of insects or the hiss of a serpent gliding along drenched sward.

"You can almost believe it is waiting for someone," said the man. He was seated near her. "Tell me your name."

"It's calling me," she said distractedly. "I must go there."

"Don't budge. *What is your name?* What are you doing here, in that dress, on this cold night?"

"Marion," she whispered, stuttering a little bit. "Marion Laharpe. That's my name."

She thought about this name, this so fragile bubble, flown from her lips in the length of time that it had taken to slip a ring on a finger, and yet blown about on the wind for the whole length of time it had taken to run toward a park invaded by night.

"My husband has been . . ." —she hesitated, and then braced herself—". . . eaten by that creature and he is calling me and I must go there."

"Easy now," said the man. His narrow moustache quivered. "No one has been eaten. But even if someone had been, how would you be so sure that it was your husband?"

But his voice trembled, cracked like a wall ready to collapse; it harbored uncertainty, fear and pity all intermingled, and it was made overbearing by protective anger.

"Do not lie," said Marion. "I recognize his voice and this policeman who accompanied me told me that a man had been killed and he had to come home through the park, and he didn't come home, and I heard his voice on the radio before I came out, and he was calling me. A million people heard that voice. You cannot say the contrary."

"No," he said. "I believe you." His voice fell away while he was speaking and it seemed deathly. "We weren't able to do anything. We closed the gates too late. We saw him come out of a pathway and in the wink of an eye the creature was on him, engulfed him. It happened very quickly. I ask your forgiveness. If I can help you . . ."

Then the tone in his voice harshened.

"We are going to kill this thing. I know that your husband will not be restored to you by our so doing, but I must say this to you. We cannot take any additional risks. Look."

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The long tubes of flame-throwers glistened like tongues on the grass, or like sound teeth in a rotting mouth. They were placed on the turf on the far side of a network of glimmering electric wires. And alongside each of the lances, a man appeared to sleep; but a shiver sometimes ran down his back and he would move his head while his eyes struggled to thread a path through tall grass and leafy thickets, trying to sound out this region so hostile and full of snares that lay spread out before him.

"No," said Marion in a loud voice. "Don't hurt him. I am sure that it is Bernard."

The man shook his head.

"He is dead, madame. We saw the thing happen. Perhaps the monster repeats without ceasing his last word, mechanically. He died thinking of you, that's certain. The professor will explain that to you better than I can."

"The professor," Marion said. "I listened to him, too. He said that there wasn't any danger, that it was necessary to stay calm, and that he knew what he was doing, and that this was a great event and . . ."

"He is just like us. No more than that. He wept when that thing attacked your husband. He said that he did not understand it. He said that he had been waiting all his life for the friend come down from the stars. He said that he would rather have been eaten himself than to have seen that."

"He stood silent," she said bitterly. "He said everything would be all right. He said that it was necessary not to panic and he knew that Bernard . . ."

"He meant it for the best. Now, he says that it is necessary to sweep that vermin from the surface of the earth and return it to hell. At this very moment he is compounding a gas."

"Marion," softly called the voice without lips, the voice without ivory teeth or fleshy tongue, from the other side of the ruddy copper tubes.

"I want to speak to him," she said, when silence came again. "I am sure that it is Bernard and that he will understand me."

"By all means. We have tried that too. But it makes no reply."

She took the microphone between her fingers like a rock curiously polished by the sea.

"Bernard," she breathed. "Bernard, I am here."

Her voice spurted out of the loudspeaker like water out of a fountain, strangely altered, distilled. It reverberated against the trees and frittered away among leaves, flowed the length of the trunks like sap made sound, and worked its way in among twigs and grasses. It flooded over the turf, impregnated the groves, enfolded the little paths, and agitated the surface of the artificial lake with an unrevealing wave.

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"Bernard. Do you hear me? I want to help you."

And the voice replied:

"Marion. I am waiting for you. I have been waiting for you for such a long time. Marion."

"Here I am, Bernard," she said, and her voice was light and fresh. It was soaring above the heaps of sand abandoned by day to the shovels of children. It was gliding among swings, the bridle-path, the see-saws, among the rings and the trapeze hung by the portico.

"He calls me. I must go there," she said.

"It is a trap," said several voices behind her. "Stay here. There is nothing human down there."

"What difference does that make? It is Bernard's voice."

"Look," they said.

A floodlight came on like the opening of an eye, and pierced the black air like a tangible spear of light. And it revealed a mass of darkness, glistening, bubbling, foaming, made of huge bubbles heaped together, coming up to burst at the surface of a viscous yet flaccid coal-black sphere. It was a living sponge of jet, breathing and swallowing.

"Spittle from space," said the solemn voice of the professor, behind her.

"I am coming, Bernard," said Marion. She let the mike fall and hurled herself forward. She avoided the hands that tried to hold her back and began to run on the gravelled path. She jumped over the spiderweb of copper filaments and passed among the red tongues of the flame-throwers.

"It's a trap," cried a heavy voice behind her. "Come back. The thing has stolen some words from your husband and is using them as bait. Come back. That thing is not human. *That thing has no face.*"

But no one pursued her. When she turned her head, she saw the men stand up and seize their lances and look at her in horror. Their eyes and their teeth shone with the same metallic brilliance as the buttons on their uniforms.

She rounded the little lake. Her feet struck cement with a yielding, dead sound, and then they found again that fresh and caressing contact with the grass.

All the while she was running, she was asking herself what was going to happen, what was going to become of her. But she told herself that Bernard knew the answer for her, that he had known all along, and that was as it should be. He was waiting on the other side of that black door her voice had penetrated with so much difficulty, and she was on the point of catching up with him.

A memory came abruptly into her head. A phrase read or heard, an idea harvested, so that it could now be milled and tasted. It went something like this: Men are only

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empty shells, sometimes cold and deserted like abandoned dwellings, and sometimes lived in; frequented by entities named life, jealousy, joy, fear, hope . . . and so many others. Then solitude is ended. And she tried to sort it out, all the while running, breathing through her mouth and seeing that small warm wind condense into a fragile shred of steam before her. She was thinking about it while looking back at the pale, contracted faces of the soldiers, diminishing at every step. It seemed to her that this being might have crossed space and hunted out a new world because it felt itself desperately hollow and useless on its own, because no one of these unseizable entities—neither joy nor hope—wanted to consort with it. Perhaps she and Bernard would live at the center of its soul as do confidence and anguish, silence and ennui, in the hearts and minds of men. And she hoped that they would bring it peace, that they would be two small tranquil glimmerings relieving the alveolar deeps of its unknown intellect.

"Bernard," she cried out. "I have come."

She heard the men shouting behind her.

"Marion," said the monster with Bernard's voice. "You took such a long time coming."

She closed her eyes and launched herself into it. She felt the chill slide over her skin and leave it like a garment that one slips out of. She felt that she was transformed. Her body was dissolved, her fingers tapering away to nothing. She was dispersing throughout this great sphere, moist and warm and comfortable; beautiful and good, too; she knew it now.

"Bernard," she said. "They are coming at us to kill us."

"I know," said the voice quite close now and warm and reassuring.

"Isn't there anything we can do, to escape?"

"That is up to it to decide," he said. "I have just barely made its acquaintance. I asked it to wait for you. I don't know just what it's going to do. Take off into space again, perhaps? Listen."

So, melded one into the other, at the center of a cave of flesh, with all those trees around them, that alien grass and that hostile light, they listened.

They heard approaching the padded, measured tread of the human killers who, their fingers curled around their copper lances, faces hidden under masks, seeking like a scalpel that palpitating jet-black blot, were ready to breathe out a gray and lethal fog.

They heard the footsteps surrounding them, a broken branch, a wet rustling, a muffled oath; a click.

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Herbert Gold, author of THEREFORE BE BOLD, LOVE AND LIKE *(Dial), and others, here turns loose his lively, imaginative prose on a possibility which has also been considered by the great scientist Dr. Leo Szilard—and which we try to hope is more whimsical, or at least symbolic, than real . . . .*

THE DAY THEY GOT BOSTON

by Herbert Gold

EVEN BEFORE THE MISSILE struck, their leader went on the air to apologize.

"First," he said, "have you heard the story about the constipated Eskimo with the ICBM? But let's be serious a moment. It isn't our fault! One of our lieutenants got drunk, and the rubber band holding a bunch of punch cards broke, and the card stamped BOSTON fell into place—a combination of human and mechanical factors, friends. . . ."

(It landed with sweet accuracy in a patch of begonias in the Commons. The entire city was decimated and the sea rushed through to take its place. Cambridge and Harvard University also lay under atomic waste and the tidal wave.)

"WE'RE SORRY!" sobbed their leader. "Truly, sincerely sorry. The lieutenant has been sent to Siberia. His entire family, under the progressive anti-fascist Soviet penal reform policy, has joined him for rehabilitation therapy in the salt mines. All the rubber bands in the entire Anti-Fascist Workers for Peace and Democracy Missile Control Network are being screened for loyalty. I feel terribly humble and sincere this evening. It's the triumph of brute accident over Man's will, which aft gang agley, as our poet Mayakovsky once put it. We're sorry, friends across the mighty sea! Nothing like this must ever happen again."

Our reprisal system had not gone into action at once for two reasons: (a) A first wild rumor that Cuba had at last declared war on us, and, (b) Man, we just, like, *hesitated*. (Who can tell if

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those blips on the radar screen really mean anything? I mean, like, you make a mistake and *POW,* I mean. . . . And then the hometown newspaper really gets after you.) This fear of the hometown paper, this hesitation may have saved the universe from an immediate holocaust. Castro made no promises, but said that his barbudos were ready and waiting in front of their teevees.

The U.S. of A. lay in a state of shock. A powerful faction of skilled psychiatric observers argued that this instance of national catatonic neurosis was justified more by external event than by internal oedipal conflict. Many people had close relatives in Boston—not everybody, but enough to justify the virus of gloom which seemed to be making the rounds. The American League would have to replace a team just as the season began. The roads from New York to Maine were in bad shape.

Their Leader shrieked, "Don't retaliate, my friends. My dear friends. Don't Retaliate. We will send reparations, delegations of workers, peasants, and intellectuals, petitions of condolence; the Kharkov soccer team will play out the Red Sox schedule. But don't retaliate, or we will be led to destroy each other utterly, dialectically! It was a mistake! Could happen to anyone! His pals gave a little birthday party for this here lieutenant, see, you know how it is, they drank it up a little, and then these rubber bands tend to become crispy with age. . . ."

Harvard gone. Boston beans homeless. A churning hole in American history.

The mayor of Boston, Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic, sent a telegram to the mayor of Boston, Tennessee: EXTEND HEARTFELT REGRETS AND SYMPATHY TO THE PEACE-LOVING WORKERS OF THE UNITED STATES ON OCCASION OF TRAGIC DISAPPEARANCE OF ONE OF ITS OLDEST CITIES. AS AMERICAN POET W. WHITMAN SAID, "BAA BAA BLACK SHEEP LET NOTHING YOU DISMAY." AZONOVITCH, MAYOR, NOW LARGEST BOSTON IN WORLD.

By a miracle, both Radcliffe and Wellesley were spared. However, there were no men for the coming Spring Weekend. By another miracle, due to the influence of radioactive—er—the scientists had been attending a conference at Boston University—the Radcliffe students were now physically entitled to console the Wellesley girls in their deep mourning at Spring Weekend.

"A miracle!" cried Norman Vincent Peale, joining with Their Leader in an appeal to forgive and forget. "We are being tested from on high. What happened at Radcliffe on that turbulent occasion is proof positive that there is

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a power in the universe making for righteousness, and also for intergroup balance with special reference to sexual harmony."

"DO NOT RETALIATE," cried out their Leader, and he was joined in this appeal by their foremost ballet dancers, film directors, and violinists. They also made proud reference to their other rubber bands, punched cards, and lieutenants with a bead on New York, Washington, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Denver, Los Angeles, and every American city down to the size of Rifle City, Colorado. "If you retaliate, we are all doomed to become epiphenomena floating in a Marxist-Leninist Anti-Fascist Outer Space." (Were they threatening us again?)

Senator Morris Russell, D., of Colorado, was one of the first to recover his senses. "Of course it was an accident," he said. "Lieutenants will be lieutenants and accidents will happen, ha ha. But we can't allow this sort of accident. How will it look in the eyes of the rest of the world? Those yellow hordes to the East are very conscious of Face, y'know. America has lost enough face already, what with the corruption in television quiz shows and the disorganization of our youth in those coffee-drinking espresso parlors. We must strike a blow for peace by wiping out Moscow!"

WE COULDN'T AGREE MORE, WITH OUR BOY MORRIE, declared a banner held up by all the residents of Rifle City, Colorado. It happened that none of them had relatives in Boston and so they could speak uncorrupted by grief or other private interest. Their sheriff had divested himself of his stock in the Boston & Maine Railroad. Their rage and sense of national dignity was expressed with typical, folkloristic Western dignity. They called each other "Slim" and "Buster" at meetings, sang Yippee-Yi-yo-cowyay, and urged immediate decimation of the entire European continent. (They were a little weak on geography and wanted to make sure that the Roosians got theirs.)

Our Side hesitated.

Their Side went on the air with round-the-clock telethons. Mothers in Dnieprpotrovsk sent quilts with quaint illustrations from Baba-Yaga and other classical Russian tales to the few survivors in Waltham and Weldon. The Chief of Staff of their anti-fascist atomic service announced that he was going into a retreat on the Caucasus for two weeks of contemplation. A publicity release from their Embassy in Washington announced that his favorite hobbies were Reading, Tennis, and the Beat Generation, in that order, and that his wife, who was retreating with him, liked American musicals and collected Ca-

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pezio shoes. One of their composers was preparing a memorial symphony, entitled, "The Lowells Speak Only to God;" one of their critics was already preparing his attack on the symphony as formalistic, abstract, and unrooted in Russian folk themes.

We waited. Their Leader wept openly, live on tape, and the tape was broadcast every hour.

The clamor for revenge and forgiveness, forgiveness and revenge, wracked the nation, indeed, the entire world. The citizens of Avignon, France, sent an elementary geography textbook as a civic contribution to the public library of Rifle City, Colorado.

Only the drunken lieutenant in Siberia failed to appear in public. He persisted in telling his colleagues in the First Disciplinary and Re-Education Unit (Iodized Division): "Ya glad. Ya ochen pleased with myself. Sure it was a mistake (oshibka), but it was one of those slips which reveal one's unconscious thoughts (Rus., micl; Fr., pensées). My analyst tells me that deep within my semi-Tartar soul I hate Boston (BocmoH), I have always hated Boston (BocmoH), I even hate the memory of Boston (BocmoH), ever since I failed my Regents on the question where was the tea party at which the proletarian masses refused to serve the colonial imperialists. Now I am free, free, free!" *

*"Cbo8gHo, cbo8gHo, cbo8gHo!"

He was given occupational therapy, including modern dance, during the rest periods from his duties in the salt mine. It was not actually a "salt mine;" it now produced, as part of the five-year plan to upgrade consumer products, an all-purpose seasoning called Tangh! (TaHk!).

The first crisis passed. Our advanced missile bases, our round-the-clock air fleets, our ICBM installations held back their Sunday punch. It was Tuesday, and they waited. "Halt! Stop! Whoa there fellas!" went out the order. Their Leader's emotional display reached us in time and made contact with the true, big-hearted America, which loves person-to-person contact. The Buffalo Red Sox was hastily but reverently appointed to play out the American League schedule. Surrounding areas in Massachusetts were quarantined. The moral question about whether the former Radcliffe girls, miraculously spared but radically altered, could be permitted to carry out their new impulses—this was debated in every surviving pulpit of New England. Some claimed the transmogrification as an instance of divine punishment, others thought it a logical triumph of feminism, still others felt that we should live and let live, of whatever sex might develop. . . . Under the pressure of world events, a decision was postponed about the ap-

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propriateness of the Spring Dance at Wellesley. As its contribution to rehabilitation therapy, the Aqua-Velva company sent a tank car of after shave to the Radcliffe dormitories.

Meanwhile, back in Washington and Moscow, the lights burned late. High level negotiations proceeded with deliberate haste. "Who's practicing brinkmanship now?" jeered our Secretary of State.

Their Man hung his head. He was genuinely abashed. He declared that he was "sorry" and "ashamed," but what he really meant in American was "humble" and "sincere." As a matter of fact, his son had been visiting at Harvard on the night of the Regrettable Incident, catching a revival of "Alexander Nevsky" at an art movie in Cambridge, and this happenstance, of great personal significance to the Ambassador, was often recalled at difficult moments in the continuing negotiations.

It was clear that neither our national pride, nor the opinion of the rest of the world, nor—and this new factor surprised all commentators—the swelling sense of guilt within the Soviet Union, would allow the disaster to pass without some grave consequences. To an astonishing degree, a wave of fellowship spread between the two nations. In Kamenetz-Podolsk it was recalled that a Russian had fought by the side of our General Vashinktohn. In Palo Alto it was recalled that Herbert Hoover had personally fed millions of starving moujiks in 1919, and had returned to America with badly nibbled fingers.

"All right," said their Ambassador, in secret session, "since you feel that way, we'll give you Kharkov. We have a major university there, too."

"No," said our people, "not big enough. Harvard was recognized as tops here. We want Moscow. We need Moscow. There was a beautiful modern library, entirely air conditioned, at Harvard. Moscow it must be."

"Impossible," said their man. "That would be like doing Washington, D. C. Justice is one thing, but that's our capital and it's got to come out even, give or take a million. My son, my son (sob)." He pulled himself together and continued, "Don't forget, our Asiatic, subhuman, totalitarian population is got feelings of national pride, too. How about Kharkov plus this list of small towns in Biro-Bidjan, pick any one of three?"

Our Men shook their head. (By dint of prolonged fret and collaboration, plus the prevailing wind out of Massachusetts, our team had only one head. Radcliffe-like changes were being worked as far south as Daytona, Florida. The Radcliffe situation

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was causing riots in girls' schools of the mid-south. They also wanted some.)

At any rate, Kharkov was definitely out. It meant too little to the irate citizens of Rifle City, and the small towns of Biro-Bidjan meant too much to certain minority groups important in electing the Republican senator from New York.

Vladivostok?

"No," we said. (Nyet.) A mere provincial center.

Stalingrad?

"No." Big enough, but the university could only be said to equal Michigan State. And what are Stalingrad Baked Beans to the Russian national cuisine?

"Ah," said their man, kissing his joined fingertips, "mais le kasha de Stalingrad!"

No. They were mere buckwheat groats to us.

"LENINGRAD?" they finally offered in desperation. "We understand how you feel. It is our second city, and it was founded by Peter the Great in a thrilling moment well described by Eisenstein in a movie of the same name. We want to do anything we can. . . ."

Wires hummed, diplomatic pouches were stuffed, the matter was settled with extraordinary unanimity and good feeling. Our people and theirs celebrated by drinking a toast to the memory of Boston, another to the memory of Leningrad—

—although their bereaved Ambassador, who also, as luck would have it, happened to have a son studying Fine Arts at the University of Leningrad, stealthily emptied his glass in a potted palm. . . .

And at that moment, according to agreement and plan, the City of Leningrad disappeared from this earth. We used a type of hydrogen engine previously only tested in the south Pacific. It exploded as brilliantly in the frozen north as it did under the soft flowered breezes of the southern trade routes. (Our Air Force was careful to avoid the mistake which had caused so many unsuccessful launchings in the past. They put Winter Weight Lube in the rocket motors.)

The wails of Russian mothers could be heard the world round, also live on tape.

Abruptly the citizens of Rifle City, Col., began to have solemn afterthoughts. The Sheriff made a speech, declaring, "No manne is an islande, entire of theirselfe. Everie manne is a part of the maine, including Slim over there. Them Russkies got feelings of sibling affection, too." Dozens of quilts thrown together by the mothers of Rifle City were airlifted to the environs of Leningrad. Gallant little Finland, which had been destroyed by mistake, also received our apologies and a couple of quilts. (In honor of Sibelius, Finland would be ac-

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corded diplomatic representation equal with that given nationalist China. Most of the surviving Finns were already in their ministries scattered about the world.)

Our President went on the air to plead through his tears, "Don't Re . . . . Don't Re . . . ." The teleprompter was eventually cranked by hand. "Taliate," he sobbed.

Their Leader also went on the air to explain to the grief-stricken mass that this act of national propitiation had been fully discussed by proper authority in both nations. Calm, he urged. Pax Vobiscum, pronounced a puppet head of the Russian Orthodox Church. "Thank you for that comment," said their Leader.

Murmurings of nepotism made his position insecure for a time. His nephew had been recalled from duty in Leningrad only a scant twenty-four hours before the American missile struck (exactly on target, by the way). However, he pointed out that both his aged mother and his sister had been residents of the departed Flower of the North, and Freudian science was so poorly developed that this explanation silenced the rabble.

For a time, peace and world fellowship. A new cooperation, decontamination, courtesy. Parades, requiem masses, memorial elegies. Historians, poets, and painters, both objective and non-objective, were kept busy assimilating the new subject matter. "Potlatch for the Millions" was the title of a popular exposition of the theoretical bases of the new method of handling international disputes. In schools of International Relations, this science began to earn course credit as Potlatch 101 (The Interlinked Destruction of Cities) and Potlatch 405 (Destruction of Civilizations, open only to graduate students).

President DeGaulle warned that France could not consent to being left out of any solution aiming to resolve international tension. The gothic (or romanesque, as the case might be) cities of France the Immortel, united in purpose, were ready to be weighed by Justice on her scale of the future as they had been hefted in her hands in the marketplace of history. From the right came a concrete proposal: "Wow, let 'em take Algeria, Mon Cher."

The state of beatitude was of brief duration, for hard is the way of Man on earth.

A Russian malcontent wrote a letter to the editor of Pravda, signed "Honored Artist of the Republic," and soon the word had passed all the way to their highest authority. Certainly, the intention on both sides had been honorable, with the highest consideration for basic human values.

Both Boston and Leningrad

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had been major ports. Fine.

Both Boston and Leningrad had housed major universities. Excellent.

Both Boston and Leningrad, metropoli of the north, gave summer arts festivals on the green. Beautiful.

With relation to historical memories, real estate values, and cultural expectations, they were perhaps as similar in importance as could be found. However. . . .

And a full delegation from their Presidium of Trade Unions urged that negotiations be reopened on this question. Leningrad had also been, unlike Boston, a center of the Soviet cinema industry.

"Perhaps," they suggested, timidly at first, "you could give us South California, too?"

Of course, soon they would begin to insist.

Through Time And Space With Ferdinand Feghoot: XLIII

The Great Crisis of 1967 occurred when the vault at Fort Knox abruptly refused to come open. Experts of all sorts, including several notorious safecrackers borrowed from other Federal repositories, failed to budge it. As rumors leaked out, the subconscious feeling that there'd never really been anything there took hold, and even the *Wall Street Journal* began to predict nationwide panic.

President Kennedy, still alert and decisive, at once phoned Ferdinand Feghoot, who was at a Science Fiction Convention in Bangkok; and when Feghoot arrived at Fort Knox he found assembled the President, the Cabinet, the major dignitaries of the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "We shall soon have it open, gentlemen," he said with a smile. "But first let's relax. Mr. President, may I suggest some sort of diversion—a game, shall we say?"

At once, the Chief Executive divided those present into two touch football teams, and appointed a Supreme Court justice as referee. But they had barely begun to play furiously when Feghoot stepped forward, seized the umpire's arm, and led him to the recalcitrant door.

It flew open as soon as he touched it.

"How lucky it is," explained Ferdinand Feghoot, "that I prefer more sedentary games. Otherwise I might not have remembered that it almost always takes Jack's arbiter to open."

—GRENDEL BRIARTON (*with thanks to Herman Mudgett*)

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Bertina Beedle would have been a quite insupportable wife, if George Beedle had not been an efficiency expert with special emphasis on the conservation and use of time. Of course, when Bertina took on a homicidal lover, the problem became a bit trickier . . . .

the timekeeper

by Michael Young

EXACTLY FOUR SECONDS BEFORE eight o'clock on the morning of the murder, George Beedle pushed away the dark-haired Spanish girl.

He opened his eyes, blinked twice. He reached over the mottled pink and white back of his wife and slapped the alarm clap just as it began to toll the hour with the asthmatic churning of metal striking metal. The only sound to escape the time-consumed instrument was a crystallic tinkle, not unlike the far-away church bell one might hear any morning on Spain's *Costa Brava.*

The following thirty-five seconds of George Beedle's life were spent in a carefully regulated return to this dimension. He studied his wife's abundant back. A back like that, he thought, should be buttered and salted and sold for popcorn.

In a single, not-ungraceful movement—a carryover from a far more glamorous era when his air force was winning a war—George Beedle swung his pale legs from under the covers. As his feet made contact with the gritty floor, he winced.

Six minutes for a shower. Four minutes for tea. Seven minutes to get dressed. Finished, he sat by the side of the bed, ignited his pipe, looked again at the woman who planned his murder.

Her mouth hung open and she whistled discernibly through broad flaccid nostrils. Glinting clamps emprisoned yellow frizzes of hair. White grease masked her face. Scabs of lipstick adhered to her lips like paint on a weathered barn.

Her narrow pig eyes forced aside layers of flesh and she looked

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out at George. She reached one paw down into her bed and extracted a handful of white sand.

"Sand again," she said. "In *my* bed."

"I'm sorry," George said.

"Sand. Jeezo! Whazzatime?"

"Eight-thirty."

Bertina rolled from the bed and padded to the bathroom like a great blonde polar bear. She rubbed pink into her cheeks and red onto her lips. She put a cigarette into her mouth.

"You're late for work," she said as she selected one of her circus tent dresses from the closet. "*Some* efficiency expert! Pro'ly the only efficiency expert in the world that's late for work."

"I'm not going to work."

"Not going? Of course you're going. There's nothing wrong with you."

"I've retired."

"Retired? Forty-five years old —you *can't* retire. Think you're gonna live off *my* inheritance. Buddy, you got another think comin'."

"You keep your money," George said. He exhaled a cloud of pure blue smoke. "It's just that I've worked too long for time. Save ten minutes, fourteen steps, three man-hours. Now, time will work for me."

"Oh Jeezo—you *are* a kook."

In moments of crisis, Bertina plugged in the vacuum cleaner. She was somehow able to think more clearly when the machine roared.

Whannnnnnnnnnnnnnn.

The vacuum cleaner's monotone whine was an extension of Bertina's voice, the aluminum hosing, an addition to her arm. The machine, like everything Bertina touched, assumed her personality. It whined loudest when George came home from work, shrieked when he napped, reached new cacophonic heights during the Saturday afternoon football game.

Whannnnnnnnnnnnnnn.

"*George!*" She shouted over the mechanical roar. "You might as well know this, I'm leaving you."

"Really?"

"I can't stand this drab life any longer. I need excitement, glamor, interesting people. I'm moving to New Jersey."

"I guessed you would leave," George said. "I checked the bank account yesterday. Who's the other man?"

"It's Herbie," Bertina said. "Herbert Devereux."

Whannnnnnnnnnnnnnn.

Poor Devereux. Didn't he have *eyes*? Of course, he *was* a psychiatrist and that might explain it. Renting temporary love, monetary understanding. Male prostitute to a universe of middle-aged women. Ideal husband for one hour a week. Forty bucks a throw.

"I shouldn't have thought Dr. Devereux would want our savings," George said. "His bills took most of

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it. Didn't the inheritance cover the tab?"

"Don't be small, George."

"Is there any chance of my speaking to Devereux on a man-to-psychiatrist basis?"

"Don't be cute, George. Of course you can talk to him. I'll call him now."

Bertina picked up the telephone. Even the phone was infused with Bertina's personality. It had never been a phone, not in the ordinary sense. Bertina had selected a pale lavender extension and wore it around her neck like a gaudy piece of costume jewelry. Then, too, it soon lost all receiver characteristics. Bertina used it strictly for transmitting. It allowed her to seep into countless homes. George imagined that the listener momentarily became part of Bertina—a finger or even a limb—amputated only by the click of the phone returning to its cradle.

That wounded Bertina. She bled internally as the phone went dead. She suffered when the vacuum cleaner was switched off. She almost collapsed when George left the apartment. George Beedle, the most intricate of Bertina's many tools. The reflector for her personality rays, the amplifier of her sound waves, the moon to her sun.

Whannnnnnnnnnnnnnn.

Dr. Devereux did not bother to knock. He ignored George, walked directly to Bertina, wrapped her in his gray cashmere arms. George Beedle coughed. The psychiatrist turned around and offered his hand.

"Sorry chappy," he said. "Didn't you see there."

"Don't apologize." George ignored the outstretched hand. "Most people *don't* notice me. It's a *trend.*"

"I see." Dr. Devereux tapped his horn-rimmed glasses on the back of his left hand. "Just how *long* have you felt inferior to other people?"

"It's not that at all. Other people are usually so self-centered that . . ."

"Of course," the doctor said. "It's the rest of the world that's crazy."

"In a sense."

"You didn't come here to analyze George," Bertina said.

"No I didn't, pet," Dr. Devereux said. "I came to kill him."

George Beedle stiffened in his chair. He hadn't considered that eventuality.

"Kill me?"

"Quite right," Dr. Devereux said. He reached into his pocket and extracted a snub-nosed revolver with pearl-plated handle. He leveled it at George. From his other pocket he extracted a small vial of barbiturates.

"But why kill me?" George protested. "I won't fight the divorce."

"Just to collect on an insurance policy," the young doctor said, "Bertina took it out a year ago, you

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remember? The payments have become too costly."

"Don't talk about it," Bertina said. "Do it."

"Quite," the doctor said, "but I'd like to give George a choice."

"A choice?"

"I *could* shoot you," Dr. Devereux said. "But that would be so messy. On the other hand, if you would like to take these barbiturates it would make things ever so much easier for us all."

Then it happened.

From the wall next to George came the muffled sound of a woman laughing. It was young laughter, rich with desire, throaty, impatient.

"What was *that?*" Bertina turned off the vacuum cleaner.

"Sounded like a girl laughing," George ventured.

"But on the other side of that wall is the street," Bertina said.

"Sound carries," Dr. Devereux explained. "No more delay, George. Which way will it be?"

"The pills," George decided. "I'll take the pills."

He looked for a long moment at the deadly vial. Bertina handed him a glass of water. He dumped the pills into his mouth and washed them down with water.

Whannnnnnnnnnnnnnnn.

"I want to say, Mr. Beedle, that you're being terribly decent about all this. Barbiturates are the most common suicidal agents today. Tasteless, painless, ideal medication for a sick world. Yes, quite decent."

"Not at all," George said.

"Probably correct," the psychiatrist went on. "Twentieth century man has lost the will to revolt. He has been mentally disciplined into patterns of timidity, accepting even death over violence."

Whannnnnnnnnnnnnnnn.

Bertina's metallic arm scraped grime from the Venetian blinds, cleared cobwebs from the corners, sucked dust from the curtains.

"You've got about ten minutes of life," the doctor said. "One thing I'd like to bring up. We withdrew your savings yesterday —pitiful amount for a man your age."

"I never did understand money," George said evenly. "My business was time. I'm a timekeeper, you know. Tell other people how to save time—where to install the water cooler, how to design a first-rate efficient lavatory, what machines will replace ten men."

"But time is money," the doctor said.

"There is no market value to time," George protested. "It is far too pure and its value is a constant."

"Not at all. Eight more minutes. Think of the value of time to a man in your position."

The feminine laughter again echoed through the small apartment. It seemed to come from the bedroom. High pitched at first, it

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danced down the scale one note at a time. It was no longer muffled. It was followed by a single word that came from the wall directly behind Dr. Devereux.

"*Carito!*"

"*Mas tarde,*" George answered.

"What *was* that?" Bertina asked.

"It's Spanish," George explained. "It means *later.*"

Bertina ran into the bedroom.

"There's nobody here," she said.

"There *must* be," Dr. Devereux said. "The voice came from there."

"Let me explain," George said. His head buzzed with the poison of the pills. "That was Maria."

"Jeezo. By you that's an explanation?"

"It's over your head, Bertina," George said. "But maybe Dr. Devereux will understand. Our expert on matters of the mind. Maria belongs to time. Time, as you know, is the controller of all space. Maria is as real as any of us and once occupied space just as we do. But her qualities supersede space just as time does. Consequently, she survives in time."

"I don't get it," Bertina said. "George, has there been some hanky-panky around here?"

"Extraordinary." Herbert Devereux polished his spectacles on a monogrammed handkerchief. "The most extraordinary case of thought-transference I've ever encountered. George has dreamed up a mythical creature, just like a little boy seeking escape from his parents. She has become so vivid to him that he is able to mentally recreate her for us. He imagines she laughs and we actually hear her laugh. I've seen Polgar accomplish similar stunts—but never with the absolute fidelity . . ."

"You don't understand," George said. His head felt heavy and it was an effort to support it.

"Go on," Dr. Devereux pleaded.

"Your clocks tick but that is not the sound of time. Thirty blank squares on the page of a calendar show no true picture of time. Time is passing right now and we are not aware of it."

"*Your* time is running out," Dr. Devereux consulted his wrist watch.

"No, my *space* is running out. But time defeats space. For you, time is an incurable disease. You caught it when you were born and it will prove fatal to you. But I have spent a lifetime holding time in my hands. I *know* it."

"I wish you weren't going to die," Dr. Devereux said. "If you were my patient, I could write a book about this. Reduced rates, of course."

"Reduced rates." George began to laugh but wound up yawning. "Money. Big houses. Space. Two-week vacations, more space. Never time. Time is everything. Maria is there. So is Cleopatra—*there* was a woman who gave up space for time. It's all there you know. Sunshine from a million days.

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Epic loves. Lost worlds. All a part of time."

"He's crazy," Bertina passed judgment. "He's off his kook."

"Shut up you," Dr. Devereux snapped at his accomplice. "Let him finish."

Whannnnnnnnnnnnnnn.

"I'm afraid you miss the point," George said.

"No, no," the doctor said. "Extraordinary. Escapism complicated by schizophrenia and a manic inferiority complex. Yet, no signs of depression. I had a patient who pulled a blanket over her head and refused to leave her bed for an entire month. But *this*? It's something new, something . . ."

George Beedle stood up. His eyelids were insupportable. The echoing waterfall of the vacuum cleaner splashed into the very recesses of his brain. He hoped he had not delayed too long. Time.

"Where do you think *you're* going?"

"Bertina, I *know* where I'm going. Do you?"

George leaned heavily against the wall. His head seemed to float. He kicked off his shoes and struggled vainly to remove his stockings.

"Afraid to go with your boots on?" the doctor asked.

"It's just . . . just . . . that Maria likes to go . . . likes to wade in the water."

"Stop him, Herbie!" Bertina put her hands to her mouth.

"He's not going anywhere," the doctor said.

"Aqui," the voice came from behind the wall. *"Aqui, Carito."*

"Extraordinary realism," the doctor said.

The room spun drunkenly away from George. Even the walls of the room slid from his hands.

Maria, unable to wait any longer, plunged her arms through the plaster wall. Dr. Devereux dropped the revolver. Slender arms, bronzed under a million Mediterranean suns, reached out to George. Golden bracelets were the only decorations on the arms other than a fine coating of sun-bleached down. George reached for the arms and they caught him. He could feel himself being drawn through the wall, pulled by the strength of all time.

Dr. Devereux lunged clumsily and grabbed George Beedle's left leg. Bertina held the other leg.

"You can't get away with this," the doctor shouted.

"Don't go!" Bertina pleaded. "The *insurance* money!"

The only answer was the distant hush of sea water breaking gently over sloping black rocks on Spain's *Costa Brava.* George Beedle was gone. No trace of George remained on their empty hands. On their hands, they had only time.

Whannnnnnnnnnnnnnn.

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If you wanted a really decent house, you had to go to work for General Housing . . . if your appliances went bad, you'd have to switch to General Appliances to replace them. Unfortunately for Larry Moss, there was no General Rebellion, and the General he seemed most likely to end up with was Court Martial.

PRIVATES ALL

by Floyd Wallace

THE ROBOT CLEANER COUGHED hoarsely, not unlike a seal with a fish caught in its throat, and scurried erratically, snorting noisily and nuzzling the dust.

The repairman wiped his hands. "It's running," he said.

"Not very well," said Larry Moss.

"Yeah, but it's running. What do you want?"

"It's guaranteed a lifetime."

"The lifetime of the appliance," said the repairman. "The first time something goes wrong, that's the end of the guarantee. If we can keep it going for you, that's strictly gravy."

"But it's comparatively new," said Larry. "I've seen them fifteen years old in better shape than this."

"Yeah? Who had one?"

"A friend of mine," said Larry.

"Did he work for General Appliances?"

"Yes."

"That's the difference. They don't build the same quality for Housing that they do for themselves."

Larry ignored the explanation. He watched the cleaner apprehensively as it approached the fireplace. The cleaner extended a tip cautiously toward the ashes and the firescreen obligingly rolled up out of the way for it. When a foot or so of the hose was exposed the screen banged down swiftly. The screen wasn't as fast as the cleaner, which withdrew the hose in time.

"Nothing wrong with those reactions," said the repairman.

The cleaner stood quivering in front of the fireplace. Again it extended the snout but when the screen rolled up it did not accept

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the invitation. It shook and then rolled away and began vacuuming books.

"Done?" said Larry as the repairman packed his kit.

"Unless there's something else. I've gone over the dishwasher, stove, bed, and the landscape. Nothing else is covered by the service contract, is there?"

"I can't think of anything. I must say that nothing is working as well as when I bought the house."

"If I were you I wouldn't say it," growled the repairman. "It's not polite to bitch about housing if you work for General Housing. You do work for them, don't you?"

"I have a house."

"It could be your wife's."

"I work for Housing. She Entertainment."

"Entertainment? I'll bet she knows a trick or two." The repairman leered.

"Yes," said Larry. His wife was dear to him but she did not know a trick, let alone two. "Nothing more you can do with that cleaner?"

"It's noisy but it's working. If you're fussy about noise you can have it clean when you're out."

As he said this the cleaner picked up a book and blew on it heavily, scattering dust. Larry moved toward it but the repairman restrained him. "Take it easy. Give it a chance to show it knows what it's doing."

Several small snouts extended and began sucking in the dust cloud. Meanwhile the main snout opened wide and began to ingest the book. The book shape passed slowly through the tube and upon reaching the body slowly reversed direction and finally emerged from the nozzle somewhat crumpled but intact. The cleaner replaced the book on the shelf, vibrated, rolled to the next room and climbed on the table.

"See? It didn't hurt the book," said the repairman.

"I prefer flat books," said Larry. "Why is it on the table?"

Scratching his head the repairman went after it. "You've got me. You could use it for cleaning dishes."

"I have a dishwasher that picks up the dishes."

"Yeah, but this is a pretty good little machine."

"I don't want it on the table."

"Maybe it's forgotten the sixty-third robotic law," said the repairman.

"What's the sixty-third robotic law?"

"Don't expect me to remember. Robots themselves forget," said the repairman. "All I know is that when something goes wrong with these babies it's usually the sixty-third law. We'll fix that though."

The repairman knocked the cleaner off the table. It fell to the floor, whirred, and started to climb back. The repairman kicked it and

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the cleaner stopped, buzzing questioningly. Again the repairman kicked it. The cleaner fled to the kitchen, opened the oven door and climbed in.

"That got it off the table," said the repairman.

"But I don't want it in the oven."

"You're intelligent. You ought to be able to think that through. It'll crawl out of the oven when the heat's turned on."

"I suppose it will," said Larry. "It just seems to me that it's a poor home when all the appliances don't work properly."

"Take my advice buddy. Don't say that to anybody but me and don't say it to me again," said the repairman with a scowl. "Ever hear of general laws?"

"I'm as loyal to the General as you are. I merely think that everything in a house should function perfectly."

"Don't think it either," said the repairman. "This place is falling apart. Do you know you've logged more than forty five thousand life hours on this shack?"

"That's counting company," said Larry. "There are three of us and we've had it less than four years."

"It's still wear, even if there's nobody in it. It has to be prorated, you know," said the repairman. "Why don't you buy a new place? Then you'll be satisfied."

The repairman left before Larry could reply and he still hadn't thought of what he should have said when Peggy came home. Peggy was a brass blonde, which was standard with General Entertainment. There was nothing compulsory in this standard, mostly it was a means of social identification. To nearly anyone Brass Blondes meant Entertainment and so Peggy was blonde, just as she would have carried books and a slide rule if she had been in Education.

She opened the door. "Home early?"

"I had to get the appliances fixed today."

"I can see that you did. The place is a mess."

"It's cleaner than it has been in weeks."

"Darling. Don't shout at me. I've had all I can take of temperament today."

"Oh, because you're in Entertainment. What's special about scheduling a program, a strictly commercial program?"

"Everything in Entertainment is temperament, even something you may think unglamorous. You knew this when you married me."

She meant it. As ridiculous as it was, she was capable of getting into a fierce argument over that. "I'm sorry. I know you've had it rough," he said. "What's really bothering me is this house."

"What's wrong with the house? I think it's nice."

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"It *was* nice. Now it's wearing out."

"Oh," said Peggy. "I believe you're right."

"I shouldn't be," he said. "It's supposed to last a lifetime."

"Yes, but the lifetime of the house, naturally," she said. "How long does a girdle ad last? Lean hips, wide hips, the sensuous undulating pelvis, the stenographer's spread, the horsewoman's seat, the matron's development—the cycle runs through them all and then something else must be found. I've learned to expect this."

"But not a house. It should last," he said. "Now I'm told we should get a new one, just to have appliances that work."

"If that's what you think, trade it. I rely on your judgment," she said. "We'd better dress."

"But I've been trying to tell you —I don't see why we should have to trade it," he said. "I've been looking forward to the time the house would be paid off. After that I don't know but I have been considering General Nourishment."

"G—N? I suppose there are times you do want something special in the way of food," she said. "As for the house, I leave it entirely to you. It's your department. Dress now."

"Do we have to go out?" Her expression indicated they did. "Paper or cloth?"

"Informal. I'm sure you'll enjoy yourself once you're out of the house."

"Maybe I won't," he said. "I saw Africa and China twice this week and we've already been to Mars and Venus. What's left?"

"Didn't I tell you?" she said calculatingly. "This is one party that's not transportation. We're going to the Kingans." She brushed her lips against his. "Food, darling. Hurry."

He suspected that she'd had no intention of going to the Kingans, until she found him in a difficult mood. As for the Kingans, they had nothing to recommend them except their food. One of them was in Nutrition.

Sandra came home from G—E (Education) and they put her to bed before leaving. She'd been fed at school—this was part of the Housing contract—Housing had a good Education clause, which was to be expected since few people bought houses who didn't also have children. Larry romped with her for half an hour since it was nothing for him to get ready and then left her with Peggy while he hurriedly changed. It was safe to leave Sandra alone. The sitter was the best.

This was another thing that had to be said for Housing. Their sitters were always the best and most up to date though the rates were the same as for anyone else. There was something about G—H, the good solid status that came

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from owning a home, or possibly a secret agreement between the two generals that always produced the best sitters available.

They put Sandra in her room, turned the sitter on her, and went to the Kingans by third class Transportation. Third class T was not good, slow moving tangled streets belts instead of the faster and more comfortable underground tubes or the practically instantaneous first class air routes. But no one could have everything, at least not while there were young children. The solution was to have two or even three kids spaced just right so that between the time they grew up and before they married everyone in the family would be working for a different General. For a short period it was possible to have most things.

That was the way it went. Each General sold cheaply to his own private through the special discount credit card which granted a substantial mark-down on everything the General produced. To outsiders there was no discount and few people could afford to buy heavily from another General. This was not really a disadvantage. Anyone who knew what he wanted could shop around until he found the right General and stick with that General until he had his fill.

There were times, though, that it was inconvenient. Such as going third class T to a party that Larry Moss went to only because occasionally he actually felt hungry for good food.

There was a crowd at the Kingans when they got there. At least it seemed crowded in four tiny rooms. Opal Kingan was Health now but until last year she'd been Appliances and this helped a little. Still, people could be stacked just so deep no matter how many space savers there were so there was hardly room to circulate. Larry and Peggy squeezed in the door and stood there until Opal saw them and came over.

"Dears," she said, pecking at Peggy's cheek and squeezing Larry's hand. "It's so nice. Do you know everyone?"

"I'll meet them," said Larry. He couldn't recognize anyone from the angle he saw them.

"Darling, you're radiant," said Peggy. "That's Health, I suppose."

"It is Health," giggled Opal. "About time, don't you think?"

It was about time, Larry thought. She was healthier than she had been but that was all that could be said. She was proof, if anyone needed it, that too much food was not good for any person.

"You almost persuaded me," said Peggy, arching her brows in a sweet smile. "But my General has compensations too. Oh, before I forget." She pretended to fumble in her purse for the tickets that were always there, presenting them with a flourish that was so

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practiced it wasn't noticeable. "You might like to go to this."

"You shouldn't," said Opal, tucking the tickets away. "We hardly ever go anywhere but I'm sure we'll find use for these."

Larry saw her eyes widen pleasurably as she glanced at the tickets. Damn right they'd use them he thought. They didn't go out because they didn't have money. Fred was too sodden with food to consider overtime and extra work was bad for Opal's health. That's what they got for gorging so many years.

"It's nothing," said Peggy airily. Larry shook his head warningly but after a calculating inspection of the crowd Peggy continued: "Think anyone would care for entertainment?"

"I don't know who'll be able to see it—there are just too many here," said Opal with a laugh. "But it costs hardly anything with your card, does it? We can try."

Peggy hadn't bargained on this, Larry thought. He was the conservative one in the family. Perhaps this was mostly because he couldn't go around passing out pieces of a house. Once in a while he did get stuck by inviting too many people over but then they both had to pay for that. He couldn't just ask people to sit and admire the beautiful place they lived in. There had to be something else and what the Mosses could offer was entertainment.

Peggy's eyes shadowed but graciously she brought out her tele credit card. "We will try," she said.

"What a poor hostess I am," apologized Opal. "You haven't had a bite to eat. Wait here."

"No. You come with me. Larry'll bring me something." Peggy took a small cylindrical object out of her purse. "Here Larry. Plug in the checker and see how things are."

Larry took the checker and squeezed toward the kitchen. On his way he noticed one woman sitting on an elevator seat near the kitchen. For obvious reasons women usually sat on floor cushions or at least never raised their chairs to eye level. But this woman was quite proper in sitting so high. She had undergarments on. Most likely General Apparel. Nevertheless, Larry noticed her. She had nicely rounded thighs.

Larry squirmed into the kitchen and smelled the delicious aroma of food. He must be something of a gourmet to prefer food to ordinary nutrition. It was no better for the human body—but the taste. Yes, the taste. An elbow caught him in the ribs and jammed him against the doorway. "Well if it isn't Barry," a voice fractured his ear. "Thought you'd show up."

Wincing at the loudness as well as the mistaken name Larry turned. It was Fred Kingan, his host. "Couldn't keep me away."

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"I should hope not," said Fred, thrusting a plate at Larry. "Have some food, fellow slob. Eat it up."

Larry mumbled that he had to plug in the checker but Fred had turned away and was shoving a plate at someone else and saying: "Eat, fellow slob."

Fred wasn't a bad guy. What he said was inoffensive—but it was the way he said it—as though the only reason people came to his parties was to eat. This was true, but he didn't have to say it.

Plate in hand, Larry found the power panel in back and opened it. There was not a vacant outlet. Every machine in the place was probably plugged in. He'd have to ask Opal what was safe to disconnect. He went back to the food and loaded the plate for Peggy. Every kind of food he could think of was here. Fred had splurged.

Larry edged out to the next room, searching for Peggy. He glanced up but the woman with undergarments had come down from the ceiling. It was too bad. She had fine legs and what else he couldn't see. He went on and finally found Peggy at the side of the circle around the tele. He gave her the plate and stayed to watch the program.

It was an old routine but good comedy, done by a famous comic who had created the bit twenty or thirty years ago. The story was that of the little pig who, as an experiment, was raised as a human, everyone around him pretending that he was a person. The comic, older and grayer than when he had first created the role, *was* the little pig to perfection. He pantomimed with great art, even suggesting a curly tail that wasn't there. A series of misadventures befell the pig, who, when young, was quite mischievous, but he did grow up and surprisingly, learned to read, write and speak.

Growing up believing that he was human, the pig behaved as one. However he was a smart pig and gradually he began to suspect the truth. And then one day at dinner he asked what it was he was eating. When told it was bacon he became visibly upset and left the table to look up the word in the dictionary. When he did not return they went after him and found him in his room. He was reciting in his little pig's voice of squeaky grunts: "Herewith, to take effect at once, I resign from the human race."

They asked him to repeat it and he did. The humans laughed and asked him to repeat it. With all the comic dignity he had the pig said it again, even more forcefully. The next scene showed him squealing as he was dragged away to the meat packing plant.

The merriment from this died away and Larry remembered he was hungry and went back to the kitchen. There was plenty of food left and he piled it on his plate.

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Black rare roast beef and brown juicy ham with good fat, fresh purple onions and orange tomatoes, even olives, perfect and white. Gourmet stuff. He gulped it down before reminding himself that it was more pleasurable to eat slowly, savoring the taste sensations.

Few people were in the kitchen now; many had left to watch the entertainment. One who was there was the woman he'd seen previously sitting near the ceiling. That is, he thought it was she. He hadn't seen her face but this one was well dressed and was also wearing undergarments. She was talking to an older man and Larry could see the thin line of underthings around her thighs, well molded buttocks. There weren't two women of that description at the same party.

She was shapely, not tall and somewhat plump but with fine contours. If she weren't so well dressed he would say she was in Nutrition rather than Apparel. Maybe it was her husband who was in Nutrition but though there was nothing to suggest this, Larry didn't think she was married. The impression was there, however it came, that she was free to shop around and did so.

She squeezed affectionately the man she was talking to and came to Larry. "Uncle's such a dear, isn't he?"

His mouth was full so Larry grunted. Uncle was tall and quite chunky too, a touch of gray in his hair and a full if somewhat ragged mustache. Distinguished possibly but not dear.

"Do I know you?" she said, smiling. "I'm Julie Sanford and that's my uncle, Hugh Taylor."

He swallowed and said: "Larry Moss." Her teeth were even and white and her face was plump, very attractive; her hair was black and sparkling. Except that the well fed siren was momentarily out of fashion she could be Entertainment as well as Nutrition or Apparel. She was hard to place.

"Delightful, isn't it?" she said, indicating what he was eating. "Sometimes I think synthetics are preferable to the real."

"Fred's in Nutrition," said Larry. Her ignorance was annoying.

"I know," she said, taking a thin slice of ham from his plate and nibbling it. "Delicious. No gamey flavor of animal protein."

She wore a brassiere and needed it. Larry pictured her in thin paper, translucent. She would be very attractive, but she was that now. Belatedly he remembered the checker and went to the power panel. There was still no place to connect it.

Julie asked him what the difficulty was and when he told her she said: "I shouldn't worry. A sitter is perfectly safe."

"I know, but a checker is supplied with each sitter and I might as well use it."

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"That's sensible. Let's find out what appliance we can disconnect."

Larry agreed and when he finished eating went in search of Opal. The party was becoming confused and he didn't find her but Fred bumped into him. Fred carried a bottle. His face was red and his speech thick.

"Barry, old slob," he roared, brandishing the bottle. "Scotch wine. Real honest to god grain neutral spirits. Slop it up."

He dragged Larry to the wall and took a glass from a popout, spilling liquor into the glass which he thrust into Larry's hand. "Try this."

Larry tried it. He seldom used stimulants. They were expensive, difficult to get even in Nutrition. There were so many people and just so much food to go around that productivity couldn't be wasted on nonessentials. The scotch wine was therefore good, sweet and smoky, burning as it went down. It was partly imagination but he got a lift almost immediately.

"Drink it," said Fred, and drank half a tumblerful himself. Fred replenished Larry's glass and weaved off. Larry went looking for Opal but didn't find her. He did come upon Peggy, holding a glass and smiling warmly either at him or the man with his arm around her waist. It was just the alcohol and the party and Larry knew it didn't mean anything. The scotch wine was getting to him too. He felt fuzzy and wonderful and almost forgot what he was looking for until Julie reminded him. "I've got your connection," she said.

He turned, bumping into her and not moving away. "Connection?"

"For the checker."

"Fine."

She took his glass before he spilled it and he followed her to the kitchen. He located the checker, plugging it in. This released the nearest end, allowing him to separate it into two parts. He put the part that wasn't plugged in into his pocket. Julie took a sip of the scotch wine and made a face.

"Good, isn't it?" he said.

"Well, powerful. I've had better."

"So have I," he said, though he hadn't. He did know that it made him feel wonderful and that was all that could be asked. He took the glass from her and gulped the contents in several swallows, shuddering pleasurably. She wavered in his sight. It was becoming a hell of a party, better than wandering over half the world or to Mars or Venus just to see what was to be seen.

Here there was nothing to look at except Julie Sanford and that suited him. Other people were in the kitchen but they were at the far end. He and Julie were stand-

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ing in an alcove formed by a group of appliances that were too big to slide in and out of the walls and so in effect the two of them were quite alone. He stared in fascination at her dress. Formal and with undergarments. His finger traced the line of underthings across her thighs. "I like that," he said.

She moved away but not far. "What?"

He realized she thought he meant something different from what he intended. He was warm from what he had drunk and he tingled. "It's not many women who can afford underthings," he said.

"Oh."

She seemed disappointed and he didn't want to disappoint her. "I noticed you when I came in," he said. "You were sitting near the ceiling so I looked. Underthings show off a woman's legs so nicely." Now that he thought of it he had not merely admired the luxuries she obviously possessed. She was vibrant, freer than the people he knew.

He caught her hand clumsily and pulled her to him. She struggled but not much. When he kissed her it was almost shocking in intensity. It was actually shocking, though not from her. The tingling sensation and the warmth weren't from her either, nor from the alcohol.

He let go of her and took out the checker. It was glowing and sparking and had been for several minutes. If he hadn't been drunk he would have recognized that this was an emergency.

Julie straightened her dress, smiling. "That was unexpected."

"I didn't mean it," he said. "I'm sorry. I've got to get to the phone plate."

"Why did you do it then?" asked Julie. She caught sight of the glowing checker. "Don't worry. Nothing's wrong."

His head was still whirling but it was clearing rapidly. When he had to he could shake off a drunk fast. He left Julie and hurried to the phone plate. He didn't have a piece of general exchange in his pocket and had to dash off to find Peggy.

She was nowhere to be seen but her credit card was still in the tele. He snatched it out. No one said anything but he could sense the disapproval of those watching the entertainment. The hell with them. His kid came first.

There was some difficulty with the circuits and by the time he got a clear picture on the plate Peggy had heard and was at his side. She asked what was wrong but, intent on the picture, he didn't answer. Something was wrong with the viewer in his house and though the image was fine he couldn't raise a sound at that end. Sandra was sitting up in bed, a pinched frightened look on her face, and she didn't speak to him when he

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called out to her, didn't seem to be aware that he was calling.

"What's the matter?" said Peggy.

"She's awake."

"Nothing else seems to be wrong."

"It's enough for me. I'm going home."

As he spoke Sandra got out of bed and wandered around, unaccountably shaking. The viewplate in the bedroom was connected to the sitter so obviously the sitter was invisible but it had to be there. "We'd better go, but there's no need to become upset about it," said Peggy.

"I'm not upset, but let's go."

Hurriedly he removed the credit card from the phone and gave it to her. They got their belongings together and left. Julie was waiting for them just outside the Kingans' apartment. "I heard," she said. "I'll give you a lift."

"A lift?" he said stupidly.

"It's faster than the street belts if you have to hurry," she said.

"Anything to get home," he said.

"I live down the hall. Come with me and I'll have you home in no time."

He didn't understand what she was talking about but he and Peggy followed Julie to her apartment and through it to an outside terrace on which was parked a neat little five passenger helicar. It passed through his mind that he had misjudged Julie. She had much more than he had thought. He had never known anyone who had a *private* helicar, or known anyone who knew someone who had. If he hadn't been sweating out what was happening to Sandra he would have been impressed.

Julie swung the helicar out into the private lanes, chatting lightly to distract him. He answered but was not distracted. His head was beginning to ache, possibly from the unaccustomed use of stimulants. Skillfully Julie landed the helicar on their tiny lawn and he jumped out, heading for the house. The door opened as he approached. Inside he shivered. It was cold when he entered though he didn't notice it directly. Hurrying into the bedroom he snatched up Sandra who cried as he held her. Seconds later Peggy came and took Sandra from him.

He turned on the sitter. "What's the matter?"

"Your thermostats misbehaved," said Julie.

"It's forty degrees, twenty degrees below optimum sleeping comfort," said the sitter.

"Why didn't you do something about it?" he said.

"It's a sitter, not a fixer," said Julie.

"When the temperature dropped below the minimum I started radiating," said the sitter.

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"My capacity was not sufficient to compensate for the cold air that came from the conditioning system. I attempted to warn you but contact was delayed."

Larry felt a little guilty, remembering why he couldn't be contacted, but it really wasn't his fault. It was the house. The sitter was still radiating heat but it couldn't warm an entire house when the air conditioning was pouring in cold air. Resentfully he went around kicking the walls where the thermostats were located and this had the desired effect; heat began blasting out of the vents and in a short time the place was comfortable. He and Julie went to the living room while Peggy put Sandra to bed and turned off the sitter.

"What a nice place," said Julie, standing in front of the roaring fire in the fireplace. It was too warm now but it was better than being cold.

"It's all right. It has drawbacks."

"It was just the thermostats, and they can be replaced. Of course it wouldn't do you much good unless you put in the best, and you can't get those unless you work for Appliances."

"This is the first time it's happened," he said.

"Possibly it may never occur again," she said. "Are you coming back to the party?"

"I don't think so. I've had it."

"Glad I could be of help. I'll go now."

She got up and he went with her to the helicar. After he came back he discussed the house with Peggy. She had little to say except to repeat what she had said, that the house was his department. If he wanted to trade it for a new one, that was his decision to make. It was not what he had in mind but she pleaded a headache and went to bed before he could tell her what solution had occurred to him.

He stayed up for nearly an hour after she retired, examining the idea thoroughly. It was his idea. Julie had suggested it unknowingly but it was basically his and he would have thought of it in the next few days if not tonight. It was a practical solution, completely sound. He wondered why more people hadn't made use of the principle he had discovered. It was simple, this was the important thing. He went to bed feeling that he had accomplished something and did not mention to Peggy then or later what he had decided.

Arrangements took several days and after that he had to wait several days while formalities were observed. It was not lightly that allegiances were transferred. Still, in less than two weeks he came home with a new future. There was nothing tangible to show Peggy that he had advanced and in a

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way he regretted not having some token of the change but it would have to suffice to *know* that at last he was getting somewhere.

Peggy entered and brushed her lips perfunctorily against his. "Tired?" she said.

"Rather," he said and started to tell her but something twined about his legs. It was the cleaner, which had crept to them and was impartially vacuuming both him and Peggy. He kicked at it but it ducked and scurried away. In the kitchen he could hear it climb into the oven.

She wrinkled her nose in annoyance. "Really, you should do something about that. It creates a disturbance when I button up dinner."

It wasn't the way he planned it but it was a natural opening. "That's the second thing on my list. First are the thermostats."

"Nothing has happened since the one incident. Does it still bother you?"

"I think of it now and then. After thermostats the cleaner, and then I thought of a really good marketeer and chef, or perhaps a bathroom cosmetic machine, unless you prefer a portable model."

She frowned. "Aren't you going overboard? These things are expensive."

"They would be, if I were in Housing."

"You didn't," she said.

"I did, just that," he said. "They need men in Appliances and things are a little slack in Housing so they allowed the transfer. Today I was sworn in. It was a beautifully simple ceremony which began: 'Neither to the highest nor the lowest position in General Appliances do I aspire but will accept what my ability and circumstances warrant. All of us gathered here, witnesses and oathtaker, are the General's privates and serve him in such capacity.'"

There was a catch in his breath. Larry went on. "After that I said: 'I do, until death do us part,' and was accepted, with a promotion. It was impressive."

"All ceremonies are alike," said Peggy.

"It wasn't that way in Housing."

"It was. You don't remember," she said. "Appliances doesn't have much status."

"I think it does," he said. "Few people have houses but everyone needs appliances. Besides, there was a promotion. Half a grade."

"They could have cut you down."

"They didn't."

"I hope it works out," she said. "Will we have to give up the house?"

"We have enough paid so that it was prorated to Appliances. I found that out before asking for a transfer."

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"If you're happy I'm happy for you."

"I knew you would be. Celebration tonight?"

"Some other time," she said. "I just don't feel gay."

This was the way Appliances began. Thermostats were replaced and temperatures were always even. It was soon possible to take-home a new cleaner and it was efficient. Perhaps too much so. Color began to disappear from walls and sections of the floor were sucked loose, which occasioned sizable repair charges, but it was a good cleaner. It never climbed into the oven and he didn't have to kick it. Larry could look forward to many other things he always wanted.

But the new General was not the same as his old. There were inefficiences that Housing wouldn't tolerate. For instance, all of the large machines were crated as soon as they were created. But many of them were sold within a radius of a few miles of the plant. It would be cheaper to deliver these machines uncrated.

In Appliances favor it must be said that they managed with a small inventory and yet no one waited ten minutes for the machine he asked for. Of course Appliances had a more predictable market than homes and apartments and hotels and their vast experience helped them set quotas so that their supply was always just adequate to meet the demand. G-A *was* good and Larry might have conceded they could balance efficiencies Housing except for one thing: they didn't make proper use of Larry Moss. They didn't realize how good he had been in Housing and what he could do for them—if they'd let him.

Another thing he didn't fully approve of—hours. He didn't work longer than in housing but the distribution of his time was unbalanced. Some days he'd work overtime, a few minutes or several hours; other days he'd be sent home early. Each week it came out even but it disrupted his home life and he didn't care to think it would always be like this. He didn't want to adjust but in spite of himself he did gradually get used to this treatment.

It was no great surprise then when, for the third time in a month, Larry was told he should go home early. He heard it without wanting to, putting his things away slowly. It was two hours before Peggy would be home, two hours and a half before Sandra would leave Education. He didn't have a piece of general exchange in his pocket. A credit card for the belts but that was all. He'd rather work but they wouldn't let him so he'd have to find something else.

On his way out he stopped at the take-home counter. Novelties and gimcracks mostly, but they

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were very cheap to Appliance privates and they came in handy when visiting. He selected one item, a tiny plug-in that ionized the air in a room, causing it to glow much as neon did in a tube. It was a startling little gadget; no other light source was needed when this was used and the illumination was the best that had yet been devised, as far as illumination alone was concerned.

There were almost certain to be defects, the chief of which was that if it ionized air it was almost certain to do the same to the nervous system of anyone who came near it. And what that would do to a person Larry didn't know. Anyway it hadn't been tested for this effect yet and so it was legal until positively proven to be harmful. Larry was no one to second guess the General. If it was good enough for Appliances no one else could complain. Besides he didn't want it for himself. Any number of his friends would welcome it as a gift and no questions asked. It was also cheap to him though possibly expensive to operate.

Larry went out and rode the belts aimlessly, except that he stayed in the single fare zone. There wasn't much to this and when, after ten minutes, he found himself near the Kingans' he decided to go see them. He hadn't visited them since the party and though there was no ulterior motive, Fred did serve good food. Fred would welcome the light-all gadget. His wife had worked in Appliances but that was last year and they wouldn't have this.

Larry got off the belt and prudently walked across the zone change, presenting and withdrawing the transfer in one swift motion to the belt monitor. The machine blinked but accepted the transfer and let him on. It was sharp little things of this nature that made Larry feel good. He knew his way around. He rode the belt to the Kingans', went up to their apartment and rang the bell. No one answered. He tried again but no one came. They were probably working, as everyone else was except those stupid enough to transfer to Appliances.

Larry sat in the lounge at the end of the hall and waited. An hour and forty minutes before he was due home. In a few minutes someone left an apartment and came toward him. At first Larry thought it was Fred. The two men were about the same size. But it couldn't be Fred because he would have answered if he'd been home. As the man came nearer Larry saw that though he was overweight as Fred was, he was somewhat older and his flesh hung loosely. The man smiled foolishly at Larry, awkwardly carrying a package under his arm. His behaviour was peculiar but

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Larry thought nothing of it until the man shifted the package and Larry caught the smell. Food. Meat.

Larry hadn't noticed exactly which apartment the man had come from but now he was certain: Fred's. This was the all time low—a thief. In the words of the immortal General: "Who takes my purse takes nothing but a credit card which I can cancel in ten minutes without further liability. Who steals my product takes that which I have labored long to establish, the very symbol of my trademark." In the time it took to think this the man was past and Larry instinctively flung himself at the retreating figure. He misjudged and clipped the man's legs and the two of them went down together. The man grunted and twisted a frightened face toward Larry. "Don't," he whispered hoarsely. "I'll give you half."

Larry smashed his fist on the mouth that said it and had the satisfaction of seeing blood begin to trickle. The fat old man struggled and Larry threw another punch that flattened a bulbous nose. The fat man wouldn't give up and still he squirmed and tried to twist free. "Saboteur," shouted Larry. "Product thief."

With this, the apartments nearby emptied. What so many people were doing home at this hour Larry didn't know but they heard him and came boiling out. Taking in the situation at a glance they surged around and jerked the fat old man from Larry and began beating him, striking out in fury. Larry got to his feet and watched from a distance. The crowd tore the old man's clothing and scratched at his face. They gave the thief everything they had and the principal reason he wasn't obliterated in seconds was that there were so many of them that they kept pulling each other away.

"Please," begged the fat man in a voice that rose higher. "Don't hit me. It's bad for my health. Doctors say so." He went down and they kicked him for a while but that was tame so they hauled him up and beat him again.

Larry watched but this was enough. The thief's face wasn't recognizable. One eye bulged dangerously. There was no blood there, but a clear colorless fluid dripped from a punctured eyeball. The mob ought to know when to stop. Larry's stomach contracted and he turned away. Beside him, though he hadn't known anyone was there, was the woman he'd met at the Kingans' party, Julie something or other. "We ought to call," he said tonelessly.

"I think so," said Julie. "We can call from my place."

They went down the hall to her apartment. Larry didn't have a single piece of general exchange

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with him. He wanted her to charge it to his credit card but she said it was nothing and made the call herself.

Larry sat down. The thief deserved everything he got but Larry didn't want to go out until Protection arrived and took the man away. He didn't want to see the poor mangled bastard.

"I guess I did my part," he said when Julie Sanford, he remembered her name, finished calling. "I caught him."

"I thought it was you."

"How did you know?"

"I heard someone shouting in the hall. I opened the door and saw that you were holding him and then the mob came."

"You saw it," he said. "Why did he do it?"

"I imagine he couldn't resist the food the Kingans always have."

"Are you condoning his behaviour?"

"I'm not condoning anything. To him the temptation must have been irresistible."

"Why? He was fat," said Larry. "I never saw a fat person outside of Nutrition. He didn't have to steal someone else's food."

"I doubt that he's Nutrition. You heard him beg not to be hit because of his health."

"That doesn't put him in Health. What kind of illness produces obesity these days?"

"I can't say," said Julie. "We conquer old diseases and new ones arise as fast as we can name them. I do know that most persons' lives are not conducive to physical fitness."

"You are justifying his behavior."

"I'm not," said Julie. "You wanted to know and I told you what I thought."

"Even if he is in Health, which I don't admit, he could have transferred to Nutrition. Being a gourmet is no excuse for stealing."

"I have an unfair advantage in the argument," said Julie. "He lives nearby so I've met him a few times and know him slightly. He's in Health for an obscure ailment. If he transfers he dies."

"You set me up on that," said Larry. "Maybe I should have let him get away. Fred wouldn't have missed the food."

"I think you did exactly what you should have," said Julie. "Most people can't have everything. In fact there are some who can have hardly anything. They're better off to accept it."

"Julie." A deep pleasant voice sounded.

"Uncle wants me," said Julie. "Excuse me. I'll be right back."

He watched her disappear into the next room. In spite of his somewhat gloomy preoccupation with the fat man it was a pleasure to see her walk. She had such fine motions to walk with. When she was gone he shook his head and

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looked around, mostly to take his mind off what he had been thinking of.

The word for the apartment was gracious. He'd been here once before, when she'd flown him home during the crisis with the sitter but he'd been upset and hadn't noticed anything then. Though in the same building with the Kingans' it was nothing like their place. It was larger than his own home, which was considered a showplace. It was roomy and there was no need for space savers but there was plenty of these too, flush against the wall so that only a practiced eye could discern that there were space savers. The effect was one of quiet magnificence, more suitable for a board of Generals than a private residence.

A closet door swung open and this was another nice thing. In most apartments everything was efficient because if it wasn't people couldn't live there. Here there was enough room so that a door didn't have to function as an intricately put together machine that wouldn't work at all if one part failed. Larry got up to close the door and looked inside. Clothes—Julie's. Rows of dresses, coats and jackets. And everything was cloth, or fur or leather. There was not one paper article of apparel among them.

Larry sat down, dazzled. He couldn't place Julie and her uncle. Housing, Apparel, Appliances, Transportation, Nutrition, Health—they seemed to belong to all of them. Generals lived no better, and they were not generals. They didn't have the authoritative manner.

Julie and her uncle came out soon after Larry sat down. "Julie tells me you captured a product thief," said Hugh Taylor in a meaty voice.

"I don't take credit for it."

"But we know where the credit belongs," said Hugh Taylor, wringing Larry's hand.

"Thanks. I'm Appliances," said Larry automatically, staring at the other's lapel for identification. There was none.

"That's a good field," said Taylor easily. "Where would we be without Appliances? Julie, this calls for a celebration. Bring a snack." He didn't say what he was in and it wasn't manners to ask. There couldn't be anything mysterious about it though—there shouldn't be.

Julie came back with a tray. Larry recognized crackers, though they were startlingly white, but the deep yellow squares and thin slices of some red meat, not bloody, just red, were beyond him. "Food?" he said, tasting a yellow square. It was somewhat bitter, but good in an odd fashion.

"Our own," said Taylor. "You may not be familiar with it. Try everything."

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Larry tried. The red meat was strong, even gamey. From a wild animal the thought flashed through his mind. No, there wasn't one wild creature left on earth. He sipped the drink and looked up in surprise. "Champagne?"

"Beer," said Taylor with a laugh. "We serve things that belong together."

It was delicious, everything was, but he left as soon as he could get away. Even so it was late when he got home. Peggy had held dinner for him; Sandra had been fed and put to bed. They had a silent quarrel during dinner; he was not hungry and anyway their food was hardly the equal of what Julie had served.

The silent quarrel lasted through the tele programs and didn't end when they went to bed. He thought of the fat old man whose obesity did not come from overeating and probably was not as old as he seemed, perhaps no older than himself—and then he thought of Julie and her uncle. They were worlds apart.

He wondered why everything came so easily for Julie and her uncle—but the bed said: "Sleep." The thought disturbed him and he went on thinking it through the ten minute interval in which he was allowed to fall asleep naturally. He didn't reach a conclusion and was still awake when the bed again said: "Sleep." This time he was not allowed further grace; the machine put him to sleep immediately.

In the morning he picked up his thoughts where he had left them and took them with him to work. He was preoccupied with this on the job and didn't stop a production line when the quota had been reached. This worked to his benefit. For once, which happened occasionally, predictions failed and there was a greater demand than anticipated for the appliance he had overproduced. It was a mistake, but since he had nothing to say in his own behalf —the best defense—instead of being demoted for goofing, he was credited with having instinctive insight and was allowed a token extra at the take-home counter.

He should have been excited and pleased at this but it didn't matter as it once would have. He'd made up his mind.

It was a week before he was able to do anything with his decision. He'd made a mark in Appliances and since he was definitely upgrading his hours were more regular than they had been. But he was new and not completely accepted and once in a while he had to take dirty jobs and less desirable schedules. The first time he got off early he went calling on Julie Sanford.

He went to her apartment hoping *not* to see her and he got his wish. No one was home. The

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door was locked but though the device was strong it was simply made. He had some mechanical skill and a good unscrambler put out by Appliances and with little difficulty he let himself inside. It was dangerous if he were caught —how much so both he and the fat man knew—but the rewards were such that he didn't think of danger. He went through the apartment hastily but thoroughly.

And there wasn't a thing.

Clothing, food, furniture, appliances—none of these gave him a clue. Neither Julie nor her uncle had ever stated their service. He had asked them directly and hinted otherwise but they had ignored him and evaded the questions so he didn't know and it was imperative that he find out.

Determinedly he searched again and finally in a wall-flush desk he came upon a number of photos of Julie. Mostly she wore tiny triangular shorts and a microscopic halter and though she was luscious when scantily dressed it wasn't this that intrigued him. He looked at the background in the pictures.

Behind her in the photos was an old fashioned house and much beyond that was a crude building and surrounding everything was a strange vegetation he'd never seen. In another picture Julie stood beside a huge ungainly machine whose function he couldn't guess. In still another she was feeding animals. Live animals. They were not in a zoo or a mechanical reconstruction park.

He snapped the pictures with his minicamera, replaced what he had found, and left the apartment without being discovered.

In three days he made sense of what he had seen but it took him hours every night after work of running down the information he sought. During this time his relations with Peggy were strained. The silent quarrel never seemed to end. He didn't get a chance to talk over with her what he had planned but it wouldn't have made much difference. Once he knew what could be done he was going to do it. And Peggy wasn't much for talk unless the subject was entertainment, which this wasn't.

He made plans, checked the angles thoroughly, went back over his plans, and then made a special application for a transfer to General Farms.

And was brought to trial, a full dress General Court-martial.

It was brief and devastating. He was a witness in his own behalf, which was possibly his biggest mistake. The plant stopped work early—it was either that or overtime for the jurors. It was a short quota day and by speeding up the production lines they were able to turn out the proper volume and still quit half an hour early. "Do you swear to tell the

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truth and nothing but?" barked the bailiff. He worked on a control panel next to Larry's.

"By all the Generals," said Larry. He was confused. Telecameras were strategically placed, many of them focussed on him. He hadn't expected to be tried at all and certainly hadn't thought it would be done with such a production.

The judge, in regular hours the Lieutenant Manager of the plant, leaned back. "You have made application for a transfer to General Farms."

"Yes sir. A special application."

"This isn't in your favor. You are saying in effect that we must consider the application whether or not it is convenient for us to do so. We may not wish to let you go."

"I didn't mean it as a slur against Appliances."

"We are the ones who decide what it means." The judge smiled heavily. "By the way, it is General Appliances."

"General Appliances."

"That's better," said the judge. "Are you aware that General Farms is not a full general?"

"I am. It is subordinate to General Nutrition."

"And you still wish to transfer? To a lesser rank?"

"I do."

"This hardly makes sense. General Farms is in a state of decline. Every year there is less land available to it and it produces less."

"That's what it says in the statement of General Profits."

"By this you must mean either that you don't believe the statements of General Profits or that there are other factors you haven't disclosed to this court. What are your reasons for transferring?"

Larry couldn't tell him. He had recognized, after digging through historical tapes, that the house behind Julie in the picture was a farm house. The animals she fed were cows, or some other domestic creature, and the vegetation was nothing less than a marketable crop.

And he couldn't say either that Farms, subordinate or not, had everything a man could want. It grew food so there was no shortage of that. There had to be houses for the people to live in and the best transportation there was to bring the produce to market and as for clothing—well, cotton was a crop.

Anything a person could want was available to those who worked for General Farms but Larry couldn't say this because it would start a rush and he'd be left out. Above all he had to conceal why he wanted to transfer. "No real reason, I suppose. I just want to transfer."

"This is an irresponsible attitude, doing what you want to," said the judge. "I am glad the

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jurors are mature and sensible privates." He banged the gavel. "What are the charges?"

The foreman of the jury read them. Larry Moss was one of the best transfers to Appliances in the last five years, and in a way this was serious, that he was a transfer. Larry did not seem to be a stable person. In addition he had a fine sense of production and had once correctly forcast the demand for a machine when the integraph had failed. Not only this, he was punctual and had used his take-home credits as fast as they were available.

"This is an unusual case," said the judge. "Potentially you are a fine private."

"I will be as good for the next General."

"If we let you go."

"But you have to."

"I suppose we do, one way or another. You shouldn't have made a special application," said the judge with a drawn smile. "What is the verdict?"

The foreman of the jury had it ready but waited until the telecameras swung toward him. He read slowly. "The defendant, Larry Moss, has been grossly insubordinate and displays a lack of responsibility. He seems to need retraining. For this purpose we recommend that he be dishonorably discharged for a period of not less than two years. Then, and only if his attitude improves, should he be given the opportunity of resuming his status as a professional private."

This was the verdict, prepared before the trial. Larry should have been warned by the telecameras. The law he was convicted under hadn't been used much recently, it hadn't been necessary to invoke it, but it was there whenever the occasion warranted. They'd dusted it off and thrown it into him. It was a shock and he couldn't actually believe it as they went through the ceremony of tearing up his credit card and removing his G-A pin and tossing it into the scrap heap where it could be easily found. They would use the pin again, sure, but it was a convenient myth that an emblem once sullied was never given to anyone else.

Larry walked home from the trial. Without his credit card he had to. He was late in getting home and Peggy was there before him. From her expression he knew she had heard. "You know," he said.

"It was on the tele," she said. "I don't think much of your idea of entertainment."

"It wasn't my fault," he said. "I didn't know they'd do this."

"Oh? They gave you an opportunity to reconsider."

"It wasn't much of an opportunity. I would have had to crawl. Anyway, I had made up my mind."

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"You might have thought of me. You could have talked it over."

"What would you have said? That it was my decision. You always say that."

"Well, this decision is yours, if you want to claim it. What will become of us?"

"Nothing drastic. I can't go to Farms immediately but they can't keep me out of Employment."

"Don't be sure what they can do. Besides, Employment is not my idea of status."

There was more, much more, but Peggy was not without loyalty. She became furious, wept and relented, and when they went to bed she was quite warm to him, more ardent than she had been in months. The warmth lasted until a few hours before dawn when she awakened and wept again. Larry got up and went to his own bed. When he finally arose Peggy was gone, having left for work earlier than usual.

This prepared him for G-E (Employment) which was about what he expected it to be. They registered him along with older men and women who were inefficient and had never amounted to much with their generals and so had slipped into G-E, and the youngsters who were in their last years with Education and couldn't decide what they wanted to be when they got out and were using Employment to sample many jobs. They gave him a credit card with the most unfavorable discount rate he had ever heard of but he didn't protest. There was one general even lower than Employment and he didn't care to investigate it first hand.

He was instructed to wait at the exchange until jobs came in. For two days he reported and waited and there was nothing for him; this was part of his retraining. After that he was told to stay home and call in every day. This was expensive, calls cost credits, and even more irksome than waiting at the exchange. At the exchange there were some people to talk to, among them a number of young girls who thought they were exceedingly attracted to him. He *was* somewhat of a celebrity. Few people were ever cashiered with as much a splash as he.

In a few days he did get jobs. Oddly, most of them were from Appliances, several hours or a few days at a time. He was given more responsible jobs than he'd gotten when working directly for them, was kept isolated from other technicians, and was never assigned to the plant he had once worked at. He never made a mistake, none that he was caught at, and he didn't complain of his pay scale, which was not quite half of what it had been.

Other jobs came from Housing. Since he had terminated there with nothing against him his pay scale was somewhat higher than

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at G-A and working conditions were better. As if to compensate, he was not called by Housing as often.

But there was no work from Farms, not even a token assignment. He'd given them publicity and they should have come through with something. Even if they didn't need anyone they should have given him a handout. What he'd gone through to get to them was the best advertisement any general could have but they didn't acknowledge it in any way.

He couldn't think much about Farms though; his efforts were directed toward climbing. Progress was slow and uncertain, to the extent there was any, but the plodding wasn't wasted. Someday he'd be a professional private again and meanwhile, if he wasn't making a living at least he was able to keep up the payments on the house. He might have been bitter but he didn't have any place for strong emotions, even when Peggy started working nights.

She didn't tell him at first; she didn't come home when he expected her. Three hours later she finally came in. Sandra had been put to bed and he was sitting and staring at the fireplace, which wasn't functioning properly but which he couldn't afford to have repaired. She was tired but pleased. "Overtime?" he said.

"Sort of."

He didn't know why but her reply made him feel uneasy. "Sort of? I should think you'd know."

"I do. I meant I don't get overtime scale for it."

"You've taken another job," he said.

"It was the least I could do. You're working hard and getting paid little for it. Another job won't hurt me."

"We're getting by," he said. This was approximately true. They had saved something and it wasn't going out as fast as he had anticipated.

"I don't want to argue," she said, going to her bedroom.

"At least you can tell me what the extra job is," he called after her. She didn't answer so he followed her. She had taken her blouse off but stopped undressing when he came in. He appreciated what a fine figure she had, particularly from the waist up, slender but good.

"Education," she said.

"Education? After working all day in Entertainment?"

"It's not strange. There are such things as adult evening classes. It helps pay for Sandra's schooling."

He did want to believe her, but it had been some time since he had felt close, wanting her as much as he did now. He touched her.

She didn't move away from his hand but he would have preferred it if she had. "I'm tired and dirty,"

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she said. "I'd like to lie down before eating. Do you mind."

"I don't mind," he said, and went to the kitchen and started her dinner. When it was done she was sleeping and he didn't think he should call her. She had probably eaten a snack between jobs and she needed rest. He set the refreeze button on the food and ate it the next morning for breakfast. It was as tasteless as what he usually had.

Thereafter he worked with less enthusiasm. The slackening of his purpose was scarcely perceptible, even to himself. He was punctual and on the jobs he made no mistakes but he didn't have his old vitality. Possibly this was because he didn't get enough sleep. Often he stayed up waiting for Peggy who seemed to come home later each time she accepted an assignment from Education.

She didn't work every night. Education called her an average of four times a week but he never knew before he came home when this would be. When she did come early she was always tired from having been out late the previous night and went to bed, alone, soon after dinner. He saw very little of her and they spoke even less. There was nothing to say.

It was bad but he could endure it. He had to. He knew he shouldn't be suspicious since she was doing everything she could to help out. There ought not to have been any place in his mind for the thoughts that kept recurring—until the night that Peggy didn't come home at all.

He stayed up till midnight doing nothing since entertainment, even with her credit card, was expensive. Finally the knowledge that he had to get up early and hold down an important production line forced him to bed. The bed whispered: Sleep, but it was hours before he did, and then it was a fitful slumber. He awakened shortly and got up, though the sleep mechanism urged him to stay in bed, going to Peggy's bedroom. She hadn't returned.

He washed his face and sat up, wishing for a drink. There was nothing in the house. Finally he went back to bed saying silently to himself, in unison with the sleep mechanism, that he should sleep. He didn't, until he got up and tinkered with the mechanism, adjusting it to the extreme range of power.

At dawn he awakened and lay there until it was time to get up. Peggy's bed had not been slept in. He fixed breakfast for Sandra and sent her to school. He sat, trying not to think but succeeding poorly. The call plate rang and he left without answering it. Employment. He didn't want to talk to them but sooner or later he'd have to. He went out and wandered the belts aimlessly, at least it

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seemed aimless—but he found himself in front of the Entertainment office that Peggy worked in. Without thinking what he was going to do he went up.

Brushing off the receptionist he said he wanted to see Peggy. The girl at the desk smiled and said Peggy was probably available. In a few minutes she came back and said that Peggy was working and couldn't be disturbed. She didn't smile. He stared at her and repeated that he wanted to see Peggy. She thought he meant it because Peggy finally came out, nervous but determinedly gay.

"You didn't come home last night," he said.

"Let's go over here," she said, retreating to a corner of the lobby. "People can hear us."

He followed. He'd raise his voice so they'd hear what he wanted them to. "You didn't come home."

"You know I've been working."

"I know, but not at what you said. In a way it was adult evening education though. Wasn't it?"

"I got some sleep. It was late when I finished so I slept where I was."

"I can imagine. What I said is that you're not working for Education. You never have worked for them."

"Don't shout."

"I haven't raised my voice, but I can understand why you don't want people to hear. Your part time job is in General Matrimony, isn't it? That's where you've been spending your evenings from the first."

"I'm not ashamed of anything I've done." She wouldn't look at him.

"I don't suppose you are. It's one thing to work for Matrimony when you're single, everybody does. But when you're already married men know it and expect more. I don't think you've disappointed them. Do you think that any one of those men will marry you?"

"Don't be sure what they'll do. You'd be surprised at the class of people that go there. I've met nothing but executives."

"I'm not surprised. Where else would they go for a quiet affair? It is Matrimony, say it."

"If you have to know, yes. It's Matrimony."

"You could have told me, Peggy," he said. "You didn't have to do it this way."

"I could have told you." Her face twisted. "You've humiliated me. I can't look at the people I work with. They know what you are. And you expect me to take this and come back for more. You don't think that I need to respect myself, that I have to do something to redeem myself. You—."

He raised his hand and then walked away so that he wouldn't

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hit her. "Traitor," was the last thing he heard her say as he stumbled out of the office. On the street he wandered in a daze, hardly seeing where he was going. At length his head cleared and his stomach stopped trying to crawl up into his throat. The sunlight was astonishingly bright and the sky was too big to look at.

There was nothing left so he got on the belt that took him to Employment. He entered the building and sat in the waiting room. It was late and he was the only person there except for the clerical workers on the other side of the counter. No one noticed him until one of the young girls who was shopping around for a permanent job and who occasionally filled in on the Employment staff looked up. She was one of those who was attracted to him so she promptly miked him to report to the assignment counter.

He dragged himself there. "Private Moss, you're late," she said. "Report to Appliances immediately."

"I'm not going," he said.

"Not going? But you have a fine record. Don't spoil it."

"I can't go."

"If you have a job you must report."

"If I go to Appliances today I'll ruin everything," he said. "Don't force me to go."

Concern showed fleetingly on her face and she retreated in consternation to the files at the rear of her office space. Presently she came back. "I think I've fixed it up," she said. "You were in very early today and took the first job that was offered. Naturally you can't go to Appliances. It's a job with a private person so you'll be all right." She smiled. "If you want to see me after work I'll put off my regular boyfriend."

"I may see you," he said, though he wasn't going to. A schoolgirl was not for him, whatever she might think.

He took the assignment card she gave him and made his way there without noticing where he was. Even though he recognized the Kingans' apartment when he passed it nothing jogged his memory until the door that he stopped at opened and, wearing something flimsy, Julie Sanford stood before him. "Employment called. I've been expecting you," she said in a sultry whisper.

It fell together in his mind. In not much more than a second he knew. Things had happened to him, unrelated events that combined in the most unfavorable way. From the first day he'd seen Julie nothing had gone as it should. This was not accidental, and he knew who was behind it. He shoved Julie inside and shut the door after him.

"You're strong," she said, wriggling inside the garment he gripped firmly.

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"Strong, but stupid," he said. "I've stopped being stupid, just now. People have pushed me around enough. Tell me why you did it." She started to say something and he knew she was going to deny knowing what he was talking about. He slugged her, a short punch to her mid-section. She went down, grovelling at his feet, gasping for breath, and still denying that she had anything to do with his misfortunes.

He bent to pick her up and the short flimsy garment slid over her body, rolling up in a tight ring just above her breasts. Her body was voluptuous but it wasn't desire he felt nearly as much as anger. He jerked her erect and threw her into a chair. He slapped her face and while she blinked back tears he said: "Tell me in detail just what your scheme is."

"It isn't a scheme. I meant only to help."

He hit her again. "I don't need that kind of help."

She covered her face with her hands so he wouldn't hit her. "What do you think I did?" she said in a muffled voice.

Hers was a beautiful body and she made no attempt to cover it. He had mauled her but she seemed to have no resentment nor even fear. Instead there was a curious eagerness. His anger hadn't lessened but he wasn't sure where to turn it. "You led me on," he said. "You flaunted the things you had in front of me. You let me know that you had everything a person can desire, and you led me to believe that I could have it too, just by asking."

"Is that all?"

She was peeking at him through her fingers. "No. You gave me access to your apartment. With what you've spent on this place you could have made it impossible for anyone to break in, but you didn't. You made it easy for anyone who wanted to get in. And it was clever to conceal the pictures, not too easy, but not difficult either. There was no real hint as to what General you were with, but with those cows, what else could it be?" He shook his head slowly. "Only General Farms doesn't want anyone."

She dropped her hands from her face and was smiling. "You think I did this to you?"

"Who else?"

"I did very little," she said. "Mostly it was you from the beginning. You're a rebel. It's there for anyone to see. That's why Appliances smashed you when you wanted to transfer. They have to keep people like you in line."

"But you didn't have anything to do with it," he said bitterly.

"Hardly anything," she said. "A canned ham and a bottle of wine convinced the Lieutenant Manager of Appliances that he should make an example of you. The point is: he was already go-

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ing to do this. I merely showed him the best way," she shrugged. "As for the rest, I've had a standing order with employment, even before you registered, that you were to be sent to me the first day you refused to report for a General job."

He would have slugged her but somehow he was helpless before the contradiction of her warmth.

"There are other people like you," she murmured. "They are on a planet."

"Venus?" he snarled. "Mars? You can have them. They're worse than here."

"You hate generals," she said gently.

He was astounded at this. But once she said it he knew it was true and he couldn't remove the knowledge from his mind. He didn't want to. "Yes, all of them. Go ahead, call me a traitor."

"But I'm not calling you that." She took his hand and put it against her. Her belly was soft and gently curved and the hollow of her navel was deep.

"What can I do now?" he said. "I can't go on like this."

"You can go to the planet. It's not in this solar system, nor the nearest ten. Did you really think the animals in those pictures were cows? With eye stalks?"

"I thought they were horns."

"And six legs?"

"It was peculiar, but how do I know what geneticists are doing?"

"They aren't doing that much," she said. "Let me help you. The planet I told you about has less than ten million inhabitants, and it's bigger than earth and nicer than earth was in the beginning. We need strong people who are dissatisfied with their lives."

"I don't know what to believe," he said.

"You can believe me," she said. "I couldn't tell you until you made up your mind." She was on him, pressing close. He fumbled with the filmy garment and it tore. She ripped it off completely. "Let me help you. I want to help."

He let her help him right there. She was expert and enthusiastic. After that they went to the bedroom and when he awakened in the night she was still pressed close to him. She caressed him and he put his arm over her. He thought he heard the door open and in a few minutes softly close. He tensed. "What was that?"

"Probably uncle. Don't worry. He understands."

"I'm sure he does," he muttered.

She twined her arms and legs around his. "Go to sleep. Isn't this nice? You're the last one, so tomorrow the space ship leaves."

"The last one? Were there others?"

"Of course. Many others."

"Do they all get this treatment?"

"Would they?" she said archly.

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"Half of them are women. But isn't this nice?"

It was nice and in the morning there was the space ship which left soon after he boarded it. It was a good ship though crowded. Larry knew he could expect this. They'd come light years to get recruits for the planet whose name he couldn't remember—he'd been told but it didn't stick—so they couldn't be fastidious about accomodations. Folding cots in a dorm for a hundred men, and one washroom. It was the same for the women on the other side of the ship. There was no prohibition against going to the women's side but Larry didn't. He didn't think much of his fellow recruits and didn't want to mingle more than he had to. They might be as rebellious as he but they seemed a sorry lot to him. Perhaps a few months on a good clean planet would straighten them out.

He didn't see much of Julie and her uncle, though this was not his choice. He had a few words with Julie when they first got on the ship and then she disappeared into a cabin forward, near her uncle's. Larry did see Hugh Taylor once or twice in the first few days they were out in space. Taylor had trimmed his mustache short and stopped combing gray into his hair and seemed much younger, perhaps Larry's age.

They slipped away from earth before Larry knew it and were out of the solar system before he thought to look back to see what he was leaving. There was merely a bright star behind and not much more than that ahead. He could think he was traveling from nothing toward nothing—but he was leaving the generals behind.

One of the men Larry particularly avoided. This man was still fat but not so sloppy, with one sound eye and another that was a poor example of the glassmaker's art. He had Larry to thank for the glass eye in that scuffle near the Kingans' but this was not why Larry avoided him. He just didn't want to talk to him. There was no reason the fellow couldn't have had an eye transplant but probably Health considered him more of a liability than an asset and booted him out much in the same way Larry had been pitched out of Appliances. A moral turpitude clause no doubt, which saved them money. He might get a transplant on the new planet, which was most likely the reason he was on the ship.

Meanwhile, he didn't recognize Larry. He no longer had binocular vision and this made some difference but the probable reason for his failure to recall who Larry was must be that he was still in a state of residual shock and had never really looked at Larry during his capture. He'd been trying to get away, not fix Larry's face in his memory.

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This was to the good, as was the food. That is, the food would have been fine but it was too good. Canned ham and aged steaks and frozen vegetables and fruits, some actually fresh. The real thing, because it was cheaper to bring it from the planet than to buy synthetics from earth. This was very rich and upset his stomach. At inconvenient times he had to rush to the washroom and heave. When it wasn't this it was sometimes diarrhea. He knew he'd eventually become accustomed to the food but until he did it was discouraging. It bothered him almost as much as the attitudes of most of the recruits.

They didn't have the spirit of pioneers bound for a sparsely settled planet. Most of them acted as though they were going from a job with a crummy General to a crummy job with another General. They'd have to change or he wasn't going to get along with them, new planet or not.

At times he thought of Peggy, wasting his emotions. He couldn't have talked her into coming with him and he wasn't sure he wanted her. That business with Matrimony was sour. As for Sandra, he would have liked to bring her, but it was pointless to think of it. Even a planet light years away had to get along with earth, and they couldn't risk kidnapping, which was what it would be called.

He isolated himself, wandering around the ship alone. He wanted to see Julie but she didn't seek him out and he felt foolish going after her. She knew where he was, if she felt inclined, and besides, he was not sure which cabin was hers. He was standing in a corridor, thinking this and looking out a port at stars when the one eyed man came toward him, grinning purposefully.

Instantly Larry headed for the washroom. It was a good excuse to avoid the man. It was a standard joke on the ship that Larry was the only person upset by the food. Actually a number of others had digestive difficulties but pretended they didn't and weren't noticed. The ruse didn't work this time; the fat man was in an exceptionally friendly mood and wouldn't be put off. He came in after Larry.

"Too bad," he said heavily as Larry hung his head and retched. "If you can stay with it G-P food will put you in the best shape of your life. Look at me." He patted his paunch.

Larry grunted dismally.

"You gotta say this for G-P," continued the man, "they give you the best of everything. Hell, even your assignments are all worked out before you get there and you don't have to think of a thing."

Larry wiped his lips and looked up. "G-P?"

"Sure. You know, General Planets."

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"You're sure it's General?"

"Of course. Didn't you read the contract you signed?"

"I signed nothing."

"Maybe they overlooked it for you. Or it could be they figured you were soft and they'd wait until you got to the end of the line and then you'd have to take what they gave you."

Larry wiped his face on his sleeve and got up. The fat man blocked his way. "Sick or something? Can I help?"

"Everybody's helping me," said Larry. "Get out of my way or order yourself another glass eye."

He shoved the man aside and went forward. At the entrance to the bridge of the ship he was stopped by a steel door. It was closed and he couldn't open it. He beat on it with his fists until a glass section slid back and a crewman peered out. "What do you want?"

"I want to speak to the captain."

"The captain doesn't speak to recruits. Go to your quarters."

The crewman closed the glass section and Larry pounded on the door again until a spark of electricity jolted him. It was rapidly building up a strong charge and he knew he'd better not touch it again. He whirled and went straight to Hugh Taylor's cabin, the only person he knew that he was sure he'd be able to find. He didn't knock. He put his shoulder against it and the door gave way.

He went in. Julie and Taylor both were there, startled and naked. Taylor was not in an avuncular position. Larry stared at them. It hardly mattered. "You're not her uncle," he said.

Taylor got up, grinning. "That's a fair guess. No relation." To Julie he said: "Go to your room. A scene's coming up. I know how to handle it."

Julie strolled unconcernedly to the door that led to her room. She smiled back archly at Larry as she closed the door behind her. Taylor put on a robe that was lying near. "Now let's get to it. Why did you break in?"

"General Planets," said Larry. He was breathing hard.

"What about G-P?"

"No one told me. I thought I was going where there were no Generals."

"Be sensible. You were against all Generals. We thought it best to keep it from you until you became accustomed to the idea. You'd been having difficulties and we didn't want to tax your emotions."

Larry swallowed. It might have been a bubble of pure nitrogen that stuck in his throat and seemed to seethe in his veins. "I thought I would be on my own," he said. "You led me to believe it was - free."

Taylor went to a small desk and sat behind it. "Use your head. Settling planets is a big business. No

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one can do it except a general. Besides, G-P isn't bad. You'll find things much easier than they are on earth. There are so few people."

"You should have told me. I might have come with you or I might have stayed on earth. But it would have been my choice."

Taylor slid open a drawer. "Look at it from my viewpoint, and Julie's," he said. "A lot of people won't go if they're merely exchanging generals, even if what they're leaving is rotten and what they're going to is good. How do you think we're going to get recruits unless we tell them what they want to hear?"

"I want to hear that I don't belong to any general," Larry said.

"Of course. It's the first impulse anyone has after he's had it raw," said Taylor. "I'm sure we can figure out a deal. You haven't signed a contract so we'll make it a good one. I've been thinking of getting out of this thing and we can arrange to have you take my place. You can work with Julie or if you don't like her you can choose your own partner."

Larry saw Taylor's hand drop casually into a desk drawer and with the motion he turned and ran. He was out of the door before Taylor could fire. He was far down the corridor when he heard the gun cough and felt something strike his back and wriggle in. He stumbled but kept going and rounded the corner before Taylor could fire again. As soon as he was out of sight he reached behind him and touched a thin wire mesh just below his right shoulder. He got fingers beneath some of the wires and tugged, stopping at once. His back was on fire. A tracer had been planted in him and he wasn't going to get it out short of major surgery.

There was never a place to hide in any ship and with a tracer in him he had no chance at all but he was hurt and it didn't occur to him that he should wait and let them come. Taylor's voice came to him faintly. It was from the tracer. In his haste Taylor had forgotten to tune him out. It didn't make any difference. It didn't help him at all to know what Taylor said.

"Guards, all out. The usual trouble but a little worse. We've got an anti-general nut on the loose. He's got a tracer in him so you shouldn't have any trouble locating him." Taylor coughed. "Be careful and don't make him a basket case. General Planets doesn't pay for the baskets."

Larry was heading toward the dorm but the guards cut him off, turning him toward the front of the ship. He saw the first one in time and doubled back, running into another as he rounded a corner. The guard was more surprised than Larry and he went down. Larry planted a foot on the

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guard's face and the man stayed down. There wasn't time to take his gun and anyway Larry didn't think he'd need it. He wasn't reasoning clearly but he knew that he couldn't let himself be taken.

He kept on, narrowly eluding the guards. His back was burning and his legs were aflame and the tracer below his shoulder broadcast every move he made and still the guards couldn't capture him. They were gradually restricting where he could go. This was the danger. If he could only get back to the dorm—but of course he couldn't. He stumbled at last into a blind corridor. There was no exit except at the far end, the hatch through which he'd entered the ship weeks ago on earth. Now that he thought of it, it was in the true sense the one way out.

He ran to the hatch and looked back. The guards were advancing slowly now that they knew they had him, were almost sure that they did. "Don't come near me," he gasped, gripping the double safety handles of the hatch. This didn't stop them though they approached more cautiously.

Still grasping the handles he faced them saying distinctly, so that he knew Taylor could hear, perhaps even see him if the tracer was rigged for a picture circuit: "Taylor, tell them to stay away. I've had my last general. They'll find out if they try to rush me."

They rushed him as he said it. He was weakening and the hatch opened with more difficulty than he thought but he did manage to start it swinging when the first guard hit him. He kicked the guard aside and yanked harder and finally the air seal on the hatch broke open. Air whistled around him, carrying the nearest guard through the hatch and out of the ship. The other guards swarmed over him; the hatch automatically closed before anyone else was blown out. Someone jabbed a needle in him and then Larry didn't hear, see, or think a thing until he was sitting in Taylor's cabin.

"You all right?" said Taylor.

He had a gun again, in the desk drawer, but Larry knew he wouldn't need it. He nodded numbly. "Except my back. Cut the tracer out now. I'll hold still."

"That's what I mean," said Taylor. "This general's better than any you've ever worked for. Hell, he won't allow us to use stick-always tracers. Here. Take this."

Taylor poked a capsule into Larry's mouth and followed it with a glass of water that he tilted so Larry had to swallow. "The pill will cause the tracer to drop off in a few days. You won't hurt a bit. In fact you feel better already, don't you?"

"Not bad," said Larry. He was even more numb, euphoria spreading over him.

"You don't feel desperate," said

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Taylor. "You know that we're really pulling for you."

"I guess I know it," said Larry. "I guess I flipped for a while. I'm over it now."

Taylor looked at him closely. "I think you mean it. Okay, just sit there for a minute."

Taylor went to a side port and opened a cover. Outside the port Larry could see a reddish gray balloon, and what had once been a profile, floating beside the ship. Taylor covered the port and knocked on the door to Julie's cabin. "Julie, thought I'd better tell you. Don't look out the port."

"I have looked. Is that his lungs?"

"Sometimes you disgust me."

"Sometimes you disgust me. This is going to look fine on our record."

"Wake up woman. Watch what's happening. That's the guard."

"Oh?" said Julie. "That makes me feel better. I like Larry."

"He's going to be all right," said Taylor. "But we can't send him back to the dorm. He'll have to stay up here with us."

"That will be cozy."

"For you it will be cozy," grunted Taylor. He came back to Larry.

"I'm sorry about the guard," said Larry.

"Don't be. You didn't push him out," said Taylor. "He knew about the out draft. At least he had plenty of occasion to learn. If he didn't allow for it, that's his fault."

"I mean, I intended to open the hatch and go out there myself."

"You're not the first to think of that."

"And then when I saw what happened to the guard—I didn't want to any more."

"Of course not. When you get down to it no one wants to die."

"I did, but I don't want to now."

"Sure. We all make our peace, one way or another."

"I've accepted what I have to," said Larry. "And by the way—I don't want to inconvenience you—about staying up here. I don't see why I can't go back to the dorm."

"I do. You can't keep something like this quiet. They'd question you and upset you again. We can't have that happening."

"But I don't want to stand in your way."

"With Julie?" Taylor grinned. "Have you been to the women's dorm?"

"No."

"If you had you'd see why it's not an inconvenience. Some of them are frights, some are just all right, but some are real dolls. We'll work it this way. You'll be in Julie's cabin most of the time. Just make sure you and Julie stay there when the door between the cabins is locked. Understand?"

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"I think I do."

"Good. I've got some business to get out of the way before we talk terms. Okay?"

"Certainly."

Taylor went to the wash basin and dashed cold water on his face. Then he jangled up the captain and said he wanted sub-etheric radio to earth.

"General Mortuary," shouted Taylor. "G-P ship New Life calling General Mortuary."

Enormous power was required to push a voice over that distance; a picture was out of the question. Very little voice came through even with all the power behind the signal so Larry heard nothing at all of the reply.

"Lieutenant Director of General Mortuary?" said Taylor. "We've got a case. No, we never take them with us. He's got to be buried on earth. He's from there. Besides it's more expensive if you come and get him. Yeah, I know, but you're in business to make money. We'll put a beeper on him and deaccelerate him at once so he won't follow the ship. Yes, the captain will give you our present position."

Taylor listened, running himself a glass of water. "Nothing can go wrong. Twenty five years with General Protection. You know that he's automatically got all the coverage there is. That's not all. He's got a family back on earth and probably other relatives. You should be able to nick them plenty."

He drank the water. "Yeah, I know it's a good thing."

He switched off the sub-etheric radio and went to the desk and searched through, finally taking out a full box of cigars. He removed two, giving one to Larry. Larry fondled it, fingering the band that said General Mortuary.

"They're mine at the start of the trip," said Taylor. "But somehow I don't feel I should touch them until I actually have a case."

He lighted Larry's cigar. "This is another thing you'll learn about the job. The actual cash money G-M pays for a tip like the one I just gave them isn't much, but the little extras are choice."

Taylor lighted his own cigar, inhaling pleasurably. "We'll talk terms for a bit and then you go over and let Julie help you with that shoulder. There isn't much anyone can do except wait for a few days, but Julie will cheer you up. She's surprisingly gentle with wounded men. This is what makes her such a good partner."

Taylor went on talking terms but Larry scarcely listened. He was quite numb, but at peace, agreeable. General Planets wasn't a bad general and he could do anything with the job he wanted. And the cigar was fine, once he got used to the idea it was the best cigar he'd ever had. It was the flavor.

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You'd think that being turned into an inside-out anteater would teach a person humility . . . but no—the witches had to go further.

PECKING ORDER

by Nils T. Peterson

"YOU MUST LEARN HUMILITY," said Witch Marguerite when she first put me in my cage. The length of my sentence I did not know. I didn't even know the cause of my sentence. It is impossible to tell in such cases. But whatever sin it was, the pride of helping or the greater pride of being helped, all that they ever told me was that I needed to learn humility.

My form was such that my punishment was not unendurable. In fact, I was rather handsome with my thick, silver-black pelt, my claws as sharp as a shrew's tongue, and my tentacles reaching out from above my forelegs to clasp together above my massive, toothy head (the tip of each tentacle tucked neatly in the opposite ear in moments of repose cutting off the sounds of the outside world so that I could contemplate more easily). As a matter of fact, I was one of the Zoo's outstanding attractions.

The Zoo was in a single room of the Witches' house. The room was unbelievably large for such a small house. But there it was, the cages three deep, reaching until you could not see the end of them or the farthermost wall of the room. The cages themselves did not look very big from a distance, but, as you drew closer to them and peered inside at the creatures contained, you began to realize their size. Mine, for instance, had lots of room for me and for a substantial imitation of what I imagine was supposed to be my natural surroundings. I would lower my head between my shoulders and hulk around. The customers thought that I was cute.

It always seemed gray at the Witches' house. To get there, you had to follow that narrow, winding road leading to nowhere in particular. People were always getting lost, though, for it had to be that winding road, and it had to lead to this nowhere in particular, the gray one.

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Each morning the Witches would get up and eat their breakfasts of dozens and dozens of hard-boiled eggs, for witches never eat anything other than hard-boiled eggs, and then Witch Beatrice would tend to the door to let in the spectators and collect the admissions fee; Witch Marguerite would feed us all, going up and down the cages thinking food at us, and Witch Guinevere would clean up the Zoo by climbing on her broomstock and riding up and down the aisles between the cages at a great rate, sending the dust flying in every direction in decorative whirlwinds and an occasional dust devil. We always enjoyed watching Witch Guinevere clean up. We would sit in our cages and think at each other about the patterns that she made, and, when she was good, we thought applause at her, and she would think back a sweet little curtsey at us. Witch Guinevere was very polite.

They were quite strict with us when the spectators were in the Zoo. Very often I would get tired of letting the spectators look at me, and I would fold my tentacles on the top of my head letting the tips rest in my ears and contemplate. But soon the spectators would complain to Witch Beatrice that I wasn't doing anything, and Witch Beatrice would complain to Witch Marguerite, and Witch Guinevere, and Witch Guinevere would come over and look at me, and then I would start feeling very warm, and I would open my eyes and see Witch Guinevere, and the floor would get hotter and hotter. Soon I would be hopping around the cage trying to keep my paws off of the floor. All of the spectators would crowd around my cage to look at me because even the water in my pond was steaming and my paws would be burned, and I would have tears of green running down my silver-black muzzle. The audience would laugh and the children, particularly the little girls, would clap their hands with glee to see me dance. Witch Guinevere would always be very careful with me, however, to see that I did not become badly hurt, but sometimes my paws would be sore for days and days.

I was one of the outstanding attractions at the Witches' Zoo because the children loved to see me pacing back and forth whirling and twirling my tentacles above my head, or occasionally grabbing the lowest branch of the tree that grew by my cave and chinning myself three or four times. Of course, some of the other creatures were popular too, such as the three-legged centaur, the inside-out anteater, and the haggard with no nose. At first Witch Beatrice was not going to allow the haggard because actually he was a freak. She said that they did not run a circus sideshow.

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But Witch Guinevere said that he looked so evil that all of the little boys and girls would be sure to enjoy him very much. Witch Marguerite said that it was just too difficult to get the proper ingredients to do a really first rate job of enchantment any more. Witch Beatrice, since she was really a kindly soul, gave in.

The last creature that they let in while I was still a member of the Zoo proper was the Squelch. I can't really say what they wanted a Squelch for. He even looked like one, all gray and flatlike with hardly any length to his legs at all, and a single eyestalk sticking right up from the middle of his body. None of the spectators ever stayed at his cage at all. So, there was more pain for the rest of us. We treated him as he deserved to be treated.

When Witch Marguerite wasn't looking, we would steal all of his food and transport it to our cages so that he was always hungry. After all of the spectators would go, we would sit around thinking terrible thoughts of slime and nastiness at him until he would writhe with discomfort. We justified our actions to ourselves by saying that it was all right since his sin must have been atrocious since he received such a terrible shape. He could barely move at all because of his short, stiff legs and wide flat body, and I used to delight in playing Witch Guinevere's trick of heating the floor up under him. Naturally, I could not do the trick as well as she could, but I could heat up one spot on the floor until it would almost glow, and, since it took him such a long time to move (it sometimes took him as much as a full minute to get off the spot since in addition to being slow he was stupid), he once in awhile got quite badly burned.

Since I was the main attraction, I got first crack at him. Then the others would take their turns at tormenting him in various ways. One day he was so badly burned, tortured, and starved that he almost died. When Witch Marguerite discovered him, we were all terribly punished, because the Witches did not want any such blemish on their administration. I had fleas in my fur for two weeks and arthritis in my tentacles so that I could hardly move them at all. The anteater was given nothing to eat but fire ants and he complained for a month of indigestion. The three-legged centaur was inflicted with hoof-and-mouth disease.

Naturally, this did not make the Squelch any more popular. When we would think at each other in the long gray night, we never thought at him at all. We ignored any overture that he made to us. It got so that he never even moved, but would just squat there in his cage blinking his single eye

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on top of its drooping stalk.

I don't know what gave him the power, or whether he had always had the power and had just discovered it, but we found out about it one particularly gray evening after all of the spectators had gone. All of us had the power to one degree or another. We used it to steal the food from him and in conversing when we would think at one and another. The Squelch discovered that he had more of it than any of us perhaps to compensate for his awful shape. The Squelch was strong enough to open the cages.

The three Witches had left the Zoo part of their house for the night. We could sense them eating in the dining room, cracking and peeling and devouring their hard-boiled eggs. All of a sudden we were aware of the movement of the top of the Squelch's cage. All of us had tried to move the tops of our cages at one time or another. The last time that Witch Guinevere heated the bottom of my cage, I tried so desperately to move the top so that I could leap out with my teeth slashing that I ended up with very bad blisters on the bottoms of my paws from standing in one place and concentrating at that top. I couldn't move it, of course. It is hard to live with Witches.

As soon as we realized the implications of what was happening, the inside-out anteater, the haggard with no nose, and I thought a big stop sign at him. He must have been stronger than the rest of us put together at this time, but he was too stupid to realize it. He protested that he just wanted a little freshness, but he stopped taking off the top of his cage when I threatened to heat up his eyestalk. After all, the Witches' dining room was right next to the Zoo, and they would be sure to hear the sound of the imploded air.

We waited until the wind stopped howling down the chimney, for that was the sign that the Witches were asleep. Then we told the Squelch that we wanted to escape. Naturally he was unwilling and kep insisting that he had been put there to learn a lesson in pride and that he would become a better man if he ever could learn it, and so he didn't want to escape. He concluded that he didn't see how he could escape in his present weakened condition and in the silly body that he had. The three-legged centaur threatened to burn off one of his seven legs. The haggard with no nose threatened to burn the fur on his back. I threatened to boil the inside of his single eyeball. He agreed that it would be better to escape.

When we were sure that the Witches were asleep, we had the Squelch remove the tops of all our cages. Once the cages popped

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and we were free, we crept quietly from the Zoo. I led because my tentacles were handy for opening the doors, and, anyway, I was the main attraction. The others followed closely as we crept outside, all except the Squelch, who moved so slowly that he was still struggling to get out of his cage when the rest of us were out in the yard or on the road. I doubt if the poor wretch ever made it even out of the door.

The taste of freedom was sharp in my mouth. Just what the end would be I didn't know or didn't care. I certainly couldn't have gone home looking like that, but I was on the road running and breathing deeply of the crisp night air, and the others, the proud ones, were with me. The road was narrow and winding, of dirt, high-crowned, and with a muddy ditch on each side. On each side of the road were the dry, leafless sticks of an abandoned crab-apple orchard. The sticks seemed to make the night pull in on the tops of us as we travelled, galloping or crawling, in the moonless night.

Suddenly there was Witch Guinevere standing in front of me, eight feet tall, red eyes piercing the gray. On the left was Witch Beatrice, eight feet tall, yellow eyes piercing the gray. On the right stood Witch Marguerite, eight feet tall, green eyes piercing the gray. I leaped, jaws open to slash, bounced from the wall of power, and fell muzzled to the ground. We were quietly herded back to the Zoo.

"All of this will be wasted," said Witch Guinevere when we were back at the Zoo room, "if you don't learn humility," looking at the centaur, the anteater, me, and the others who had made the escape down the road. "You'll never learn pride this way either," she said looking at the Squelch. "We'll just have to do something else."

They turned the whole bunch of us into hens to supply hard-boiled eggs for their table, all of us except one. The Squelch is the only rooster in the whole place.

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Hamlin was an extremely efficient, almost, you might say, antiseptically modern community. But would all that efficiency and modernity keep out the searching winds of the past, or the future . . .?

HAMLIN

by Rosemary Harris

At three o'clock, the children would come out to play. Refreshed by their afternoon nap, they were bright and rosy, full of high spirits. The women came trailing after them, dragging striped canvas chairs, which they would place in little groups along the lower half of the slope. From this vantage point, they could observe the children without imposing too obvious a supervision.

It was no accident that the project was laid out in such a way as to make possible this covert vigilance. In the brochure, delivered by special messenger to a selected few, Hamlin Town was described as "a community designed and managed with exclusive attention to the welfare and development of our young," and every detail of landscaping and architecture bore witness to the conscientious execution of this intent. The entire area, about a half-mile square, was split by a broad, tree-lined drive which wound gently upwards from the office and administration buildings to the white gate at the top of the hill. Detached as this gate was from any sort of fence or barrier, it served no practical purpose except to mark the upmost boundary of Hamlin. Beyond it lay a steep decline, littered with small boulders, which led into a densely wooded area. Occasionally, a child wandered through the gate, or past either side of it, and then, through a clever arrangement of wiring, a bell would set up a shrill clangor, and one of the women would run to fetch the wanderer back. It would be explained to him that there was nothing beyond Hamlin but the woods, in which he might easily lose his way.

The houses were clustered half way up the slope, on either side of the drive. Above these, the land was left free for a strategic plac-

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ing of playgrounds, bicycle paths, and wide stretches of lawn. Here the children gamboled, clearly visible to the women seated below. Should one of them be hurt, swinging from a monkey bar or tumbling from his bicycle, it was a simple matter for the woman nearest the scene to run to his aid. All of the inhabitants were known to one another, so that there was no difficulty in identifying a child.

The houses themselves were delightful. Low and rambling, their shingles were stained a silver grey, which shade provided a charming background for the trellised roses which outlined each doorway. These roses bloomed all the year around, lending color to every season. To the uninformed, the assortment of hues might seem a matter of chance, or of calculated variety, but the inhabitants of Hamlin knew the significance of this apparently random selection. Designed as the community was, for superior children, these roses were part of a careful scheme of identification. Each color represented the quotient scored by a child in the tests given previous to admittance to Hamlin. That is, red roses indicated the dwelling of a child whose rating might be termed astronomical, yellow was for those less high, and pink for those who, scoring lowest, still soared far above the average of the world outside.

Since each family had at least two, and more often three children, (it was considered inadvisable to sponsor a family unit with only one child, considering the personality problems almost inevitably concurrent with such a status), each doorway bloomed with a profusion of color. Here and there, a trellis entirely yellow or pink appeared, but these were very few. The management of Hamlin had been engaged, for some time, in the development of a method for insuring trellises of a homogeneous appearance, preferably red, but even they acknowledged that this was a long-term endeavor. In the meantime, as Mr. Spinny, the management representative jested, they were as gaudy as a carnival.

The Gliddon doorway presented an interesting variant. Ablaze with crimson ramblers, of an intensity deeper than those of any other, it displayed, also, nestling along one side, a few white buds. The reason for this was apparent in Sissy, the elder of the two Gliddon children. Leona, the younger one, was of a potential so far beyond that of even the Hamlin children that the management had been persuaded to overlook the fact that Sissy was a retarded child. Such an exception had never been made before, but when it was determined that Sissy's condition was the result of an automobile accident, and when

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the Board viewed, with amazement, the results of Leona's tests, it was decided that the risk was not too great. There had been some protest from one or two families who felt that one exception led to another, but on the assurance that there would be no further relaxing of standards, these protests were withdrawn.

There was no doubt that Leona was a remarkable child. Besides the evidence of the almost incredible quotient, she possessed a personal beauty that positively dazzled. Small, perfectly proportioned, she was more like an angel than an earthly child. In addition to these assets, she had an unusually lovely singing voice, to which both children and parents listened enthralled. Poor Sissy, on the other hand, was dark and awkward. Across her cheek ran a jagged purple scar, a memento of the accident, and one of her eyes had a tendency to turn inward when she was at all tired or excited.

Her voice was hoarse, and she could only jabber unintelligibly, or utter shrill, yelping sounds. If, as occasionally happened, the children's play upset her, Sissy would glance about her dartingly, stamp her feet, and emit these almost animal noises. At such times, Mrs. Gliddon would take her into the house and give her a lemonade, or otherwise distract her, until she had calmed down. It was part of the understanding that Sissy should never be permitted to interfere with the routines of the other children, and Mrs. Gliddon was most conscientious about adhering to this agreement.

Even Mr. Spinny was pleased with the success of the arrangement. He had, himself, entertained some doubt about the wisdom of admitting the Gliddons. Mindful of the oath he had sworn, when he undertook the responsibility of Hamlin Town, he hesitated to tamper with the qualifications. If the place were to maintain its unique reputation, it was important that there be no slightest letting down. Until now, he had discharged his duties with admirable assiduity and tact. When it turned out, as it had a few times, that the regular examinations indicated that a child who qualified, on admittance, had slipped back into the norm, Mr. Spinny arranged for a gradual withering of the roses about the family doorway. As a rule, the family, appreciative of the delicacy of this suggestion, departed quietly, without any fuss. Once in a great while, it became necessary to remove a trellis completely, but such unpleasant necessities were rare. The Board had cited Mr. Spinny twice for his commendable vigilance. Now, however, the white buds about the Gliddon entrance were a reminder

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that he had, without the full permission of his conscience, abetted the Board in the infringement of its own rules. At first, he had some difficulty in reconciling himself to this defection, but later on, observing Leona's continued remarkableness, and Mrs. Gliddon's clever management of Sissy, Mr. Spinny was able to tell himself whole-heartedly that it was worth a Sissy, to have a Leona.

The advantages of Hamlin were immense. It was not difficult to understand the occasional recalcitrance of those who were forced to leave. Everything was so carefully, so intelligently planned for the optimal development of the children that many of the parents found themselves hardly able to believe their luck. Each morning, the children were escorted to the special school, behind the administration buildings. Here, they received expert attention; instruction along the most progressive lines, with assiduous emphasis on the development of individual talents. They were returned home at noon, at which time they were served a hot lunch, and put to bed. At three o'clock, they emerged for an afternoon of free play. Until five, this play took place under the deceptively casual eyes of their mothers. At that hour, the women having to go indoors to prepare the evening meal, a squad of trained watchers was sent out by the management. These watchers loitered unobtrusively amongst the children, observing their actions, and taking copious notes which they submitted, in the form of a report, once a month. After supper, the children read or played quiet games until eight o'clock, when it was required that they go to bed. From eight to eight thirty, excerpts from the best classical music were piped by the community organ into each child's bedroom, lulling the children to sleep. By special arrangement, Sissy's room received only the simplest tunes, lest she become excited and disturb Leona's repose. As Mr. Spinny said paternally, "We can't have our Leona kept awake."

This use of the pronoun was indicative of the management's personal interest in every child in Hamlin. If a little girl's teeth came in crookedly, she was sent, at the owners' expense, to the best orthodontist in the country. The best children deserved the best treatment, Mr. Spinny pointed out. If, as a watcher occasionally reported, a child let fall information revealing a specific irregularity in his diet, the mother received a pleasant little note reminding her that vitamin A is important to night vision, and enclosing several carrot recipes.

Even on so homely a detail as between-meal eating, the management was alert. The children

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were not encouraged to partake of odd-hour snacks, but every afternoon, at three thirty, a Good Feelings wagon was admitted to the project. This hour was considered suitable in that it came shortly after the children's nap, when they were likely to be hungry, and far enough before the supper hour so that it would not dull their appetites. The Good Feelings wagon was streamlined and gleaming white. The driver wore a starched, sterilized uniform, and was required to dip his fingers in alcohol at frequent intervals. As a result of this precaution, his hands were bright red, and covered with powdery looking scales. His ice-cream was tested daily, at the entrance to the project, for purity and vitamin content. Mr. Spinny himself supervised the analysis, and frequently demanded an increased percentage of butter fat, or a lessening of artificial flavoring in the chocolate.

This visit of the Good Feelings wagon was the high point of the children's day, and vindicated the management's contention that children had certain universal requirements that must be satisfied to produce a balanced personality. Like the children in less privileged locales, the Hamlin children shouted joyfully when they heard the Good Feelings bell, and ran alongside the wagon holding out their nickels and dancing with impatience. The mothers would watch fondly, smiling at their antics, and even condoning the puppy-like pushing and shoving. Sissy was kept seated on the grass, beside her mother's chair, because the jostling was likely to upset her, and Leona would buy Sissy's ice-cream stick. She would tuck the paper napkin under her sister's chin, and hand her the goody. "There, Sissy," she would say, "Enjoy yourself." Many a woman would feel tears rise to her eyes, at the gentleness of the tone.

One week, the Good Feelings man was sick, with a rash all over his body, induced by the frequent dippings in alcohol. The management distributed free ice-cream, but it was not the same, and the children's disappointment began to tell on the mothers. They would watch sadly as, at three thirty, their little ones came to the curb and cocked their heads hopefully, and a few of them remarked that the management might, just once, admit one of the strange wagons that roamed the highways. The only one who did not seem particularly disturbed was Sissy. She ate the free ice-cream with relish, dribbling some of it onto her chin, and Mrs. Gliddon wiped it off, sighing, "She doesn't even know —" Smacking her lips, Sissy would squirm closer to her mother's legs, and smile contentedly.

Then, one afternoon, the woman heard music coming up the

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slope from the Good Feelings testing station. It was a strange tune, high and thin, and unlike any other they had heard. They looked at one another, puzzled, and walked over to the curb, peering around the bend. Within a few moments, a wagon came in sight, and the women laughed aloud in satisfaction. It was the Good Feelings wagon, but so changed and bedecked that the children would be doubly hilarious at its return. Mr. Spinny had outdone himself.

The wagon was drawn by a white horse, which pranced and tossed its head like a circus pony. All along the horse's mane were brilliantly colored crepe paper flowers, which rustled in the breeze, and along its golden saddle were dozens of tiny bells which jingled musically. Above the wagon was stretched a crimson canopy, from the fringes of which hung more bells, and the wagon itself was decorated with gleaming, gaudy heiroglyphics. As it came closer, the women exclaimed with astonishment at the change in the Good Feelings man. Before his illness, he had been rather thin, and, while always kindly, somewhat grave. Now, however, he had filled out in every direction, swelled his cheeks, his stomach, presenting an aspect of rosy jollity. He was playing a flute, and his ruddy cheeks were so puffed that his eyes appeared in tiny slits, which sparkled mischievously. Instead of the starched white uniform, he was attired in a red vest, yellow knickerbockers, and a pointed purple cap, from whose peak dangled still more bells. The flute glinted in the sunlight, sending off rays which made the women blink.

Turning to rest their eyes, they saw a few of the children straggle over to the curb, gazing curiously down the slope. In the forefront was Leona, her mouth half open, her eyes rapt. As the wagon drew closer, she turned and shouted something, and the other children came running, three and four at a time. The Good Feelings wagon, jingling and flashing in the sun, came to a stop where the children had gathered, and the man flung his flute into the air, pirouetted, and caught it neatly. With joyful shrieks, the children began to clamber up the sides of the wagon, but the Good Feelings man raised his arms, and they fell back. When they were all quiet, he began to sing, in a strange tongue. The mothers looked at one another in some surprise, since Mr. Spinny had expressed himself often on the inadvisability of confronting the children with anything beyond their understanding. Oddly enough, however, the children seemed to know what the man was singing about. They nodded their heads with comprehension, and chattered excitedly. After a few minutes, the

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man stopped, and bowed deeply to Leona, who, without hesitation, took up the tune in a voice so high and sweet that it cut through the air like a ribbon. Then, flicking the reins so that the pony reared and tossed its gaily flowered mane, the Good Feelings man raised the flute to his lips and played again that first, eerie tune. The wagon began to move slowly, and the children flocked after it, in a great throng. Watching, the women remarked that they had never seemed so many. They came from behind every tree and shrub to join the swelling stream, and made a breath-taking sight. Their voices rang like precious metal, and their hair, their clothing, took on an added brilliance. When the wagon had attained the top of the hill, the Good Feelings man held out his hand to Leona, who leapt up lightly beside him, and handed her the flute, which she brandished above the children like a wand, before she began to play. Poised on tiptoe, caught in the sun, she was purest glittering gold. Then, the gate swung open, the wagon dipped below the hill, and, with a great shout, the children streamed after it.

For a moment, the women were alarmed. A few of them began to run up the slope, but the others, more quickly rational, pulled them back. It was obvious, they argued, that this was all a treat arranged by Mr. Spinny. The wagon had come up from the testing station, and, conclusively, the bell at the gate had set up no warning clangor. It would be a shame for them to spoil the celebration with stupid anxiety. Mr. Spinny himself, no doubt, awaited, at the bottom of the hill. After a few minutes discussion, they dispatched one woman, securing a promise that she would reconnoiter silently, without making her presence known to the children.

While they waited, the mothers chatted happily, congratulating themselves anew on living in a place which compensated the children so lavishly for any disappointment, and reproaching themselves for their earlier implied criticism of Mr. Spinny. When they noticed that the children's voices could no longer be heard, that the project was, in fact, unusually still, they looked toward the top of the hill, shading their eyes with their hands. The woman who had gone ahead was standing with her back to them. As they gazed, she turned, and beckoned excitedly. Guessing that the children must be displayed in some panorama too charming to resist, they trailed up the slope, laughing softly, and motioning one another to be still.

When they were about two thirds of the way up, they caught sight of Mr. Spinny, running across the lawns flapping his arms frantically, and shouting in a

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squeaky, frightened voice. At the same moment, the woman at the top slammed the white gate, and there was a burst of jangling sound, and silence. Suddenly, the women understood. They began to run, pushing one another aside and panting hoarsely. Some of them were knocked down, and scrambled to their feet again, their hair full of dust, and their dresses torn. They reached the top in little clusters. As each cluster attained the summit, it stood motionless, looking down the other side, and those behind redoubled their speed, not knowing what horror awaited them. Mrs. Gliddon was last, having fallen twice. She had a bruise on her forehead, and in one hand she still clutched, senselessly, a few blades of grass.

The women stood, transfixed. The hill dipped down into the woods, and there was no sign of the children or of the Good Feelings wagon. No echo of a voice or glint of hair came back to them. Mr. Spinny came gasping up, still squeaking unintelligibly, and they turned on him like angry lions, demanding to know why he had admitted a Good Feelings man who would lead the children off into the woods. Mr. Spinny caught his breath and said that he had done no such thing, that the Good Feelings man was at that very moment home in his bed, driven out of his head by an itching, scabrous rash, and that someone had been tampering with the wiring. Then, the women screamed, all at once, and ran, stumbling, down the steep hill and into the woods, leaving Mr. Spinny to turn and walk off alone, stiff shouldered and jerky.

It was almost dark when the women came back. They marched dumbly out of the woods and up the far side of the hill, their eyes fixed straight ahead. At the top, they halted, and looked down on Hamlin. In the half-light, the roses were all grey. Someone had turned on the organ, and the wiring had gone wrong, so that, instead of playing in the bedrooms, the music, which was from the Messiah, reverberated through the streets and echoed from one house to the other. A little way down the slope, to one side, lay a child's shoe, a white pump with an ankle strap. The woman who was first picked it up and carried it dangling from her wrist, like a bracelet. The others followed her down the drive walking two by two, like convicts. When they had all gone into their houses and closed the doors, someone must have phoned in about the organ, because the music stopped and everything was still.

After dark, a door opened, and Mrs. Gliddon crept out. She walked stealthily around the side of the house, humped over, snapping her fingers and hissing softly, like someone calling a cat. Sissy

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crawled out from under a pile of leaves, and stood up. The scar along her cheek was vivid in the moonlight. Her bad eye was turned all the way in, and her throat was knotted with the effort to speak.

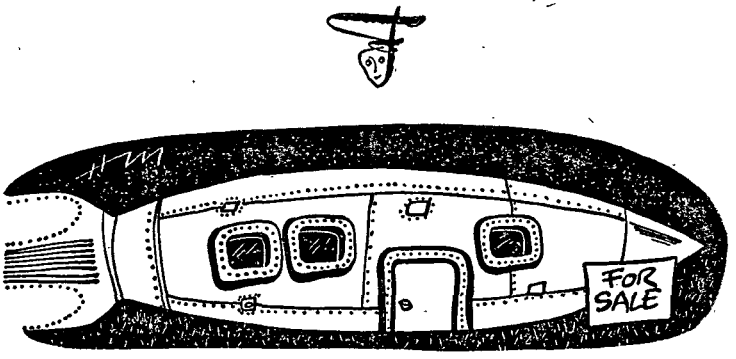
"S-sh," said Mrs. Gliddon, laying her finger along her lips.

She held out her hand for Sissy to take.

Sissy strained. Her mouth opened.

"Pretty," said Sissy, hoarsely. "Pretty."

She took Mrs. Gliddon's hand and went with her peaceably, back into the house.



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SCIENCE

If there is life out there on other planets—and surely most of us here believe there must be—it may not all be of a familiar sort. The Good Doctor here offers a guide to the basic variations we can logically look for . . .

NOT AS WE KNOW IT

by Isaac Asimov

I HAD A NARROW ESCAPE THE other day.

It started when my children conned me into taking them to a monster-movie they had seen advertised on TV.

"It's *science fiction,*" they explained. They don't exactly know what science fiction is, but they have gathered it's something daddy writes, so that the argument is considered very powerful.

I tried to explain that it wasn't science fiction by *my* definition but although I had logic on my side, they had decibels on theirs. (My little girl, particularly, can already break any sheet of glass you want to name, at twenty paces, merely by utilizing her ordinary speaking voice. And she's only 6. I wait and tremble.)

So I joined a two-block line consisting of every kid for miles around with an occasional grown-up who spent his time miserably pretending he was waiting for a bus and would leave momentarily. It was a typical early spring day in New England—nasty drizzle whipped into needle-spray by a howling east wind—and we inched slowly forward.

Finally, when we were within six feet of the ticket-sellers and I, personally, within six inches of pneumonia, my guardian angel smiled and I had my narrow es-

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cape. They hung up the SOLD OUT sign.

I said, with a merry laugh, "Oh, what a dirty shame," and drove my howlingly indignant children home.

(Perhaps I ought to add that I had to take them again the next day and that they made me go earlier and that we made an irrevocable entrance and sat through the picture. The Kindly Editor, I am sure, would not want me to spread subversive un-American propaganda about parents ever winning out in the long run.)

Anyway, it got me to thinking about the lack of imagination in movieland's monsters. Their only attributes are their bigness and destructiveness. They include big apes, big octopuses (or is it octopodes?), big eagles, big spiders, big amebae. In a way, that is all Hollywood needs, I suppose. This alone suffices to drag in huge crowds of vociferous human larvae, for to be big and destructive is the secret dream of every red-blooded little boy and girl in the world. It is certainly the not-so-secret dream of my own moody little pair who impatiently wait for D-day and spend their time, meanwhile, in being little and destructive.

What, however, is mere size to the true s f aficionado? What we want is real variety. When the cautious astronomer speaks of life on other worlds with the qualification "life-as-we-know-it," we become impatient.

What about life-*not*-as-we-know-it?

Well, that's what I want to discuss in this article.

To begin with, we have to decide what life-as-we-know-it means. Certainly life-as-we-know-it is infinitely various. It flies, runs, leaps, crawls, walks, hops, swims, and just sits there. It is green, red, yellow, pink, dead white and varicolored. It glows and does not glow, eats and does not eat. It is boned, shelled, plated and soft; has limbs, tentacles or no appendages at all, is hairy, scaly, feathery, leafy, spiny and bare.

If we're going to lump it all as life-as-we-know-it, we'll have to find out something it all has in common. We might say it is all composed of cells, except that this is not so. The virus, an important life-form to anyone who has ever had a cold, is not.

So we must strike below physiology and reach into chemistry, saying that all life is made up of a directing set of nucleic acid molecules which controls chemical reactions through the agency of proteins working in a watery medium.

There is more, almost infinitely more, to the details of life, but I am trying to strip it to a basic minimum. For life-as-we-know-it, water is the indispensable back-

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ground against which the drama is played out, and nucleic acids and proteins are the featured players.

Hence, any scientist in evaluating the life possibilities on any particular world instantly dismisses said world if it lacks water, or if it possesses water outside the liquid range, in the form of ice or of steam only.

You might wonder, by the way, why I don't include oxygen as a basic essential. I don't because it isn't. To be sure, it is the substance most characteristically involved in the mechanisms by which most life-forms evolve energy, but it is not invariably involved. There are tissues in our body that can live temporarily in the absence of molecular oxygen, and there are microorganisms that can live indefinitely in the absence of oxygen. Life on earth almost certainly developed in an oxygen-free atmosphere and even today there are microorganisms that can live *only* in the absence of oxygen. No known life-form on Earth, however, can live in the complete absence of water, or fails to contain both protein and nucleic acid.

In order to discuss life-*not*-as-we-know-it, let's change either the background or the feature players. Background first!

Water is an amazing substance with a whole set of unusual properties which are ideal for life-as-we-know-it. So well-fitted for life is it, in fact, that some people have seen in the nature of water a sure sign of Divine providence. This, however, is a false argument since life has evolved to fit the watery medium in which it developed. Life fits water, rather than the reverse.

Can we imagine life evolving to fit some other liquid, then, one perhaps not too different from water? The obvious candidate is ammonia.

Ammonia is very like water in almost all ways. Whereas the water molecule is made up of an oxygen atom and two hydrogen atoms (H_2O) for an atomic weight of 18; the ammonia molecule is made up of a nitrogen atom and three hydrogen atoms (NH_3) for an atomic weight of 17. Liquid ammonia has almost as high a heat capacity as liquid water, almost as high a heat of evaporation, almost as high a versatility as a solvent, almost as high a tendency to liberate a hydrogen ion.

In fact chemists have studied reactions proceeding in liquid ammonia and have found them to be quite analogous to those proceeding in water, so that an "ammonia chemistry" has been worked out in considerable detail.

Ammonia as background to life is therefore quite conceivable,—but not on Earth. The temperatures on Earth are such that ammonia exists as a gas. It's boiling

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point at atmospheric pressure is —33.4° C. (—28° F.) and its freezing point is —77.7° C. (—108° F.)

But other planets?

In 1931, the spectroscope revealed that the atmosphere of Jupiter, and, to a lesser extent, of Saturn, was loaded with ammonia. The notion arose at once of Jupiter being covered by huge ammonia oceans.

To be sure, Jupiter has a temperature not higher than —100° C. (—148° F.) so that you might suppose the mass of ammonia upon it to exist as a solid, with atmospheric vapor in equilibrium. Too bad. If Jupiter were closer to the Sun—

But wait! The boiling point I have given for ammonia is at atmospheric pressure—Earth's atmosphere. At higher pressures, the boiling point would rise and if Jupiter's atmosphere is dense enough and deep enough, ammonia oceans might be possible after all.

An objection that might, however, be raised against the whole concept of an ammonia background for life, rests on the fact that living organisms are made up of unstable compounds that react quickly, subtly and variously. The proteins that are so characteristic of life-as-we-know-it must consequently be on the edge of instability. A slight rise in temperature and they break down.

A drop in temperature, on the other hand, might make protein molecules too stable. At temperatures near the freezing point of water, many forms of non-warm-blooded life become sluggish indeed. In an ammonia environment, with temperatures that are a hundred or so Centigrade degrees lower than the freezing point of water, would not chemical reactions become too slow to support life?

The answer is two-fold. In the first place, why is "slow" to be considered "to slow"? Why might there not be forms of life that live at slow motion compared to ourselves? Plants do.

A second and less trivial answer is that the protein structure of developing life adapted itself to the temperature by which it was surrounded. Had it adapted itself over the space of a billion years to liquid ammonia temperatures, protein structures might have been evolved that would be far too unstable to exist for more than a few minutes at liquid water temperatures but are just stable enough to exist conveniently at liquid ammonia temperatures. These new forms would be just stable/unstable enough at low temperatures to support a fast-moving form of life.

Nor need we be concerned over the fact that we can't imagine what those structures might be. Suppose we were creatures who

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lived constantly at a temperature of a dull red heat (naturally with a chemistry fundamentally different from that we now have). Could we under those circumstances know anything about Earth-type proteins? Could we refrigerate vessels to a mere 25° C., form proteins and study them? Would we ever dream of doing so, unless we first discovered life-forms utilizing them?

Anything else besides ammonia now?

Well, the truly common elements of the Universe are hydrogen, helium, carbon, nitrogen, oxygen and neon. We eliminate helium and neon because they are completely inert and take part in no reactions. In the presence of a vast preponderance of hydrogen throughout the universe, carbon, nitrogen and oxygen would exist as hydrogenated compounds. In the case of oxygen, that would be water (H_2O) and in the case of nitrogen, that would be ammonia (NH_3). Both of these have been considered. That leaves carbon, which, when hydrogenated, forms methane (CH_4).

There is methane in the atmosphere of Jupiter and Saturn, along with ammonia, and, in the still more distant planets of Uranus and Neptune, methane is predominant, as ammonia is frozen out. This is because methane is liquid over a temperature range still lower than that of ammonia. It boils at −161.6° C. (−259° F.) and freezes at −182.6° C. (−297° F.) at atmospheric pressure.

Could we then consider methane as a possible background to life with the feature players being still more unstable forms of protein? Unfortunately, it's not that simple.

Ammonia and water are both polar compounds; that is, the electric charges in their molecules are unsymmetrically distributed. The electric charges in the methane molecule are symmetrically distributed on the other hand, so it is a non-polar compound.

Now it so happens that a polar liquid will tend to dissolve polar substances but not non-polar substances, while a non-polar liquid will tend to dissolve non-polar substances but not polar ones.

Thus water, which is polar, will dissolve salt and sugar, which are also polar, but will not dissolve fats or oils (lumped together as "lipids" by chemists), which are non-polar. Hence the proverbial expression "oil and water do not mix."

Methane, on the other hand, which is a non-polar compound will dissolve lipids but will not dissolve salt or sugar.

Proteins and nucleic acids are polar compounds and will not dissolve in methane. In fact, it is difficult to conceive of any structure that would jibe with our no-

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tions of what a protein or nucleic acid ought to be that would dissolve in methane.

If we are to consider methane, then, as a background for life, we must change the feature players.

To do so, let's take a look at protein and nucleic acid and ask ourselves what it is about them that makes them essential for life.

Well, for one thing, they are giant molecules, capable of almost infinite variety in structure and therefore potentially possessed of the versatility required as the basis of an almost infinitely varying life.

Is there no other form of molecule that can be as large and complex as proteins and nucleic acids and that can be non-polar, hence soluble in methane, as well? The most common non-polar compounds associated with life are the lipids so we might ask if lipids of giant molecular size are possible.

And the answer is that they are not only possible, they actually exist. Brain tissue, in particular, contains giant lipid molecules of complex structure (and of unknown function). There are large "lipo-proteins" and "proteolipides" here and there which are made up of both lipid portions and protein portions combined in a single large molecule. Man is but scratching the surface of lipid chemistry and the potentialities of the non-polar molecule are greater than we, until recent decades, have realized.

Remember, too, that the biochemical evolution of Earth's life has centered about the polar medium of water. Had life developed in a non-polar medium, such as that of methane, the same evolutionary forces might have endlessly proliferated lipid molecules into complex and delicately unstable forms that might then perform the functions we ordinarily associate with proteins and nucleic acids.

Working still further down on the temperature scale, we encounter the only common substances with a liquid range at temperatures below that of liquid methane. These are hydrogen, helium, and neon. Again, eliminating helium and neon, we are left with hydrogen, the most common substance of all. (Some astronomers think that Jupiter may be 4/5 hydrogen, with the rest mostly helium—in which case good-bye ammonia oceans after all.)

Hydrogen is liquid between temperatures of —253° C. (—423° F.) and —259° C. (—434° F.) and no amount of pressure will raise its boiling point higher than —240° C. (—400° F.) This range is only twenty to thirty Centigrade degrees over absolute zero, so that hydrogen forms a conceivable background for the coldest level of life. Hydro-

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gen is non-polar and again it would be some sort of lipid that would represent the featured player.

So far the entire discussion has turned on planets colder than the earth. What about planets which are warmer than the earth?

To begin with, we must recognize that there is a sharp chemical division among planets. Three types exist in the Solar system and presumably in the universe as a whole.

On cold planets, molecular movements are slow, and even hydrogen and helium (the lightest and therefore the nimblest of all substances) are slow-moving enough to be retained by a planet in the process of formation. Since hydrogen and helium together make up almost all of matter, this means that a large planet would be formed. Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune are the examples familiar to us.

On warmer planets, hydrogen and helium move quickly enough to escape. The more complex atoms, mere impurities in the overriding ocean of hydrogen and helium, are sufficient to form only small planets. The chief hydrogenated compound left behind is water, which is the highest-boiling of the methane/ammonia/water trio and which, besides, is most apt to form tight complexes with the silicates making up the solid crust of the planet.

Worlds like Mars, Earth, and Venus result. Here, ammonia and methane forms of life are impossible. Firstly, the temperatures are high enough to keep those compounds gaseous. Secondly, even if such planets went through a super-ice-age, long eons after formation, in which temperatures dropped low enough to liquefy ammonia or methane, that would not help. There would be no ammonia or methane in quantities sufficient to support a world-girdling life form.

Imagine, next, a world still warmer than our medium trio; a world hot enough to lose even water. The familiar example is Mercury. It is a solid body of rock with little, if anything, in the way of hydrogen or hydrogen-containing compounds.

Does this eliminate any conceivable form of life that we can pin down to existing chemical mechanisms?

Not necessarily.

There are non-hydrogenous liquids, with ranges of temperature higher than that of water. The most common of these, on a cosmic scale, would be sulfur which, under one-atmosphere pressure, has a liquid range from 113° C. (233° F.) to 445° C. (835° F.) which would fit nicely into the temperature of Mercury's sunside.

But what kind of featured players could be expected against such a background?

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So far all the complex molecular structures we have considered have been ordinary organic molecules; giant molecules, that is, made up chiefly of carbon and hydrogen, with oxygen and nitrogen as major "impurities" and sulfur and phosphorus as minor ones. The carbon and hydrogen alone would make up a non-polar molecule; the oxygen and nitrogen add the polar qualities.

In a watery background (oxygen-hydrogen) one would expect the oxygen atoms of tissue components to outnumber the nitrogen atoms, and on Earth this is actually so. Against an ammonia background, I imagine nitrogen atoms would heavily outnumber oxygen atoms. The two subspecies of proteins and nucleic acids that result might be differentiated by an O or an N in parentheses, indicating which species of atom was the more numerous.

The lipids, featured against the methane and hydrogen backgrounds, are poor in both oxygen and nitrogen and are almost entirely carbon and hydrogen, which is why they are non-polar.

But in a hot world like Mercury, none of these types of compounds could exist. No organic compound of the types most familiar to us, except for the very simplest, could long survive liquid sulfur temperatures. In fact, Earthly proteins could not survive a temperature of 60° C. for more than a very few minutes.

How then to stabilize organic compounds? The first thought might be to substitute some other element for hydrogen, since it would, in any case, be in extremely short supply on hot worlds.

So let's consider hydrogen. The hydrogen atom is the smallest of all atoms and it can be squeezed into a molecular structure in places where other atoms will not fit. Any carbon chain, however intricate, can be plastered round and about with small hydrogen atoms to form "hydrocarbons." Any other atom, but one, would be too large.

And which is the "but one"? Well, an atom with chemical properties resembling those of hydrogen (at least as far as the capacity for taking part in particular molecular combinations is concerned) and one which is almost as small as the hydrogen atom, is that of fluorine. Unfortunately, fluorine is so active and hard to deal with that chemists in the past naturally investigated tamer atomic species.

This changed during World War II. It was then necessary to work with uranium hexafluoride for that was the only method of getting uranium into a compound that could be made gaseous without trouble. Uranium research had to continue (you know why) so fluorine had to be worked with, willy-nilly.

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As a result, a whole group of "fluorocarbons," complex molecules made up of carbon and fluorine rather than carbon and hydrogen, were developed, and the basis laid for a kind of fluoro-organic chemistry.

To be sure, fluorocarbons are far more inert than the corresponding hydrocarbons (in fact, their peculiar value to industry lies in their inertness) and they do not seem to be in the least adaptable to the flexibility and versatility required by life-forms.

However, the fluorocarbons so far developed are analogous to polyethylene or polystyrene among the hydro-organics. If we were to judge the potentialities of hydro-organics only from polyethylene, I doubt that we would easily conceive of proteins.

No one has yet, as far as I know, dealt with the problem of fluoro-proteins or has even thought of dealing with it—but why not? We can be quite certain that they would not be as active as ordinary proteins at ordinary temperatures. But on a Mercury-type planet, they would be at higher temperatures, and where hydro-organics would be destroyed altogether, fluoro-organics might well become just active enough to support life; particularly the fluoro-organics that life-forms are likely to develop.

Such fluoro-organic-in-sulfur life depends, of course, on the assumption that on hot planets, fluorine, carbon and sulfur would be present in enough quantities to make reasonably probable the development of life-forms by random reaction over the life of a Solar system. Each of these elements is moderately common in the Universe so the assumption is not an altogether bad one but, just to be on the safe side, let's consider possible alternatives.

Suppose we abandon carbon as the major component of the giant molecules of life. Are there any other elements which have the almost unique property of carbon; that of being able to form long atomic chains and rings, so that giant molecules reflecting life's versatility can exist?

The atoms that come nearest to carbon in this respect are boron and silicon; boron lying just to the left of carbon on the periodic table (as usually presented) and silicon just beneath it. Of the two, however, boron is a rather rare element. Its participation in random reactions to produce life would be at so slow a rate, because of its low concentration in the planetary crust, that a boron-based life formed within a mere five billion years is of vanishingly small probability.

That leaves us with silicon and there, at least, we are on firm ground. Mercury, or any hot planet, may be short on carbon,

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hydrogen and fluorine, but it must be loaded with silicon and oxygen for these are the major components of rocks. A hot planet which begins by lacking hydrogen and other light atoms and ends by lacking silicon and oxygen as well, just couldn't exist because there would be nothing left in enough quantity to make up more than a scattering of nickel-iron meteorites.

Silicon can form compounds analogous to the carbon chains. Hydrogen atoms tied to a silicon chain, rather than to a carbon chain, form the "silanes." Unfortunately, the silanes are less stable than the corresponding hydrocarbons and are even less likely to exist at high temperatures in the complexities required of molecules making up living tissue.

Yet it remains a fact that silicon does indeed form complex chains in the rocks and those chains can easily withstand temperatures up to white heat. Here, however, we are not dealing with chains composed of silicon atoms only (Si-Si-Si-Si-Si) but of chains of silicon atoms alternating with oxygen atoms (Si-O-Si-O-Si).

It so happens that each silicon atom can latch on to four oxygen atoms so that you must imagine oxygen atoms attached to each silicon atom above and below; these oxygen atoms being attached to other silicon atoms also, and so on. The result is a three dimensional network, and an extremely stable one.

But once you begin with a silicon-oxygen chain, what if the silicon atom's capacity for hooking on to two additional atoms is filled not by more oxygen atoms but by carbon atoms, with, of course, hydrogen atoms attached. Such hybrid molecules, both silicon- and carbon-based, are the "silicones." These, too, have been developed chiefly during World War II and since and are remarkable for their great stability and inertness.

Again, given greater complexity and high temperature, silicones might exhibit the activity and versatility necessary for life. Perhaps silicones, as another possibility, may exist in which the carbon groups have fluorine atoms attached, rather than hydrogen atoms. Fluorosilicones would be the logical name for these, though, as far as I know and I stand very ready to be corrected, none such have yet been studied.

Might there possibly be silicone or fluorosilicone life forms in which simple forms of this class of compound (which can remain liquid up to high temperatures) might be the background of life, and complex forms the principle characters?

There, then, is my list of life-chemistries, spanning the temperature range from near red heat down to near absolute zero:

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1—fluorosilicone in fluorosilicone
2—fluorocarbon in sulfur
*3—nucleic acid/protein (O) in water
4—nucleic acid/protein (N) in ammonia
5—lipid in methane
6—lipid in hydrogen

Of this half dozen, the third only is life-as-we-know-it. Lest you miss it, I've marked it with an asterisk.

This, of course, does not exhaust the imagination, for science fiction writers have postulated metal beings living on nuclear energy, vaporous beings living in gases, energy beings living in stars, mental beings living in space, indescribable beings living in hyperspace, and so on.

It does, however, seem to exhaust the possible forms that life can take as a purely chemical phenomenon based on the common atoms of the Universe. (I suppose there will be Gentle Readers who will rise to the challenge implicit in these words and, as always, I will welcome their comments.)

Thus, when we go out into space there may be more to meet us than we expect. I would look forward not only to our extra-terrestrial brothers who share life-as-we-know-it, I would hope also for an occasional cousin among the life-*not*-as-we-know-it possibilities.

In fact, I think we ought to prefer our cousins. Competition may be keen, even over-keen, with our brothers, for we may well grasp at one another's planets; but there need only be friendship with our hot-world and cold-world cousins, for we dovetail neatly. Each stellar system might pleasantly support all the varieties, each on its own planet, and each planet useless to and undesired by any other variety.

How easy it would be to observe the Tenth Commandment then!

NOTE: *Dr. Asimov has had later thoughts on his article in our June issue—see page 4, "In this issue . . ."*

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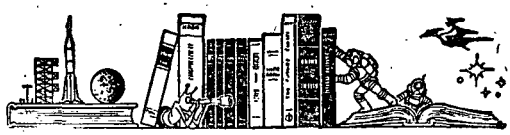
BOOKS



The Demolished Man

THE EDITOR OF *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, exasperated by an embarrassing situation, has asked this department to expose an author named Alfred Bester, and reveal the truth about his chicanery.

It seems that several years ago, Mr. Bester discussed an idea for a novel with the editor, and was so enthusiastic and full of promises that the book was announced in the pages of this magazine. Indeed, a reprint house was so beguiled by Mr. Bester's rash optimism that it bought the unwritten novel and has been hopefully listing it in its advance catalogue ever since.

To date the book has not been written; in fact it has not even been begun. Why? What can account for such reckless and unscrupulous behaviour? It might be interesting for the reader if this department attempts to analyse the workings of the (for lack of a better expression) mind of Mr. Bester. Perhaps it may cast some light on the thinking of other artists, although Mr. Bester must not be taken as a reliable example of the profession which he is presently disgracing.

In the first place, he is bone-idle and lazy. He has produced no worthwhile fiction in over five years, and confirms this department's belief that he was a mere flash in the pan. There was a devastating line in a play many years ago; a theatrical producer, discussing actors, says: "Actors! They call themselves actors because they don't want to get up early in the morning!" We suspect that Mr. Bester calls himself a writer because he wants to stay up late at night.

He protests that he spends long hours in his workshop. Unimpeachable sources report that he loafs with his hobbies, doing no writing, but claiming to be "working on a story." This is a mystic phrase which implies that some mysterious process deep in his unconscious is slaving over a creative problem while the author idles. Nonsense, Mr. Bester.

We're acquainted with one of his cronies, a contemporary com-

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poser, who exploits the same dodge in order to take naps in his studio. The composer's wife caught him at it one morning, woke him up, and exclaimed furiously: "If I ever find out you're not a genius . . .!" We've found you out, Mr. Bester.

The gentleman whines that his reluctance to buckle down to work stems from terror. He says, and we quote: "Artistic creation is a reaching into the unknown to pull out . . . you don't know what . . . and shape it into . . . something you're not sure of either . . ."

Frankly, to us this sounds more like a housewife trying to find the cake-mix in a dark pantry, but let Mr. Bester continue: "It's like a child's dread of entering a dark, empty house, or an adult's fear of getting involved with a mob of violent strangers. Emotionally speaking, the act of creation is one of haunted violence."

All this merely demonstrates that Mr. Bester is a member of a breed which this department loathes, the authors who prefer talking about writing to writing. And we suggest that he does his talking to conceal the fact that he has nothing to say.

Cowardice is another of his problems. The author must have the strength to detach himself from contemporary life and immerse himself in his work to the exclusion of all else. The work must become a temporary reality in which he believes, and in which he spends twenty-four hours a day. Mr. Bester is incapable of this.

He is living a life of bovine contentment, and is reluctant to abandon it for the perils and uncertainties that are the agony and glory of creation. In an angry scene with the editor, Mr. Bester had the effrontery to argue that only unhappy men write fiction. "It's their withdrawal from misery," he said. "A happy man doesn't write about life, he lives it." The editor exclaimed: "Are you saying that the garret is the place for the artist?" Mr. Bester answered: "Yes." This department witnessed that exchange and is prepared to nail Mr. Bester with the truth if he attempts to deny it.

Thus far we've been discussing only the difficulties the gentleman is having with contemporary fiction; when we come to science fiction, his problems are doubled. Science fiction is an exciting challenge to the imagination, which is why we believe that the best science fiction has been and will be written by young artists filled with the fervor and ferocity of youth. What they lack in experience they make up in passion and fantasy. Mr. Bester is no longer young.

However, science fiction also acts as a safety valve for mature authors; it releases the pressures built up in them by the demands and taboos of commercial writing.

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If one wishes to make a statement in a story which no network or popular magazine dares to accept, one may transform it into science fiction and have one's say. Very often the finest science fiction is produced this way.

To this observation, Mr. Bester replied that he hadn't had any story ideas rejected recently, implying by *suggestio falsi* and *suppressio veri* that a stream of brilliant successes was pouring from his pen, to be snapped up by grateful publishers and producers.

When we pressed him to name some stories he had sold, he was forced to admit, most shamefacedly, that he hadn't produced any, that he had written a few television specials, and that he was presently most involved in writing personality interviews for a magazine. So at last the truth comes out; Mr. Bester is no longer a creative writer, he is merely a magazine columnist.

Now there is no particular disgrace inherent in this role, for there are some columnists whose work is a constant source of excitement and inspiration. We can mention Red Smith of the *Herald Tribune*, Kenneth Tynan of the *London Observer*, and indeed this department's predecessor, Damon Knight. No, what is exasperating about Mr. Bester's behavior is that despite the fact that he is doing no creative writing, he nevertheless holds himself up as the doyen of science fiction, judging, criticizing, and reprimanding better men than himself.

To sum up: he is living an easy, expense-account life as a parasite attached to the underbelly of the arts; he has lost the habit of creative thought, and the discipline of creative work; he has lost the fire of imagination, and the goad of frustration. In other words, Mr. Bester has become old, fat, pompous, and complacent.

There is a charming Old World superstition that one must be extremely careful inventing stories about others, for what you pretend will happen to them will most assuredly happen to yourself. This fate has overtaken Mr. Bester and transformed him into a Demolished Man. But where are the thin, furious youngsters who should be replacing him? Can it be that a generation of security and conformity has added science fiction to its long list of victims?

—Alfred Bester

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Rosser Reeves, Chairman of the Board of Ted Bates & Co., Inc.—the world's fifth largest advertising agency—and author of the current bestseller REALITY IN ADVERTISING *(Knopf), last appeared here with a longish poem titled "Infinity." It drew more favorable letters than any poem we have published in some years—which led us to ask him for more. . . .*

EFFIGY

Could it be that under death's disguise
The man who loved my mother lies?
Whose seed helped shape my heart, my eyes?
My brain? My hands? My blood? My size?

No, this is a wax-work. Strange new face.
Propped in lace,
Hands in place.
Cheap, crude art. Different. Queer.
Shed no tear
On this bier!
This is a dummy, with an air of unction,
Waxed and rouged for a tribal function.

Where now, wax-work, where away
In your black frock coat?
To the Eden Musée?
Where away, with your silent candles?
Your long gray box with the silver handles?

You're not the man with the prophet's eye,
The holy fire, the battle cry.

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You're not the man with the scholar's face,
The open books, the gentle grace.

Nor are you the one condemned to bed,
The paralyzed, whom doctors fed
When all except his mind was dead.

Nor are you the corpse, poor things of rust,
Whose hand I held, as all sons must.
Ashes to ashes! Dust to dust!

What are you?

You know what you are,
With your ascot tie,
Your hair so prim,
And your mouth so sly?
You're a wax-work thing, with an air of unction,
Waxed and rouged for a tribal function.

Go—and leave but this to me:
A little more of memory,
My father's image, clear and plain.
I do not think we'll meet again.

$E = MC^2$

Some day, perhaps, some alien eye or eyes,
Blood red in cold and polished horny lids,
Set in a chitinous face
Will sweep the arch of some dark, distant sky
And see a nova flare,

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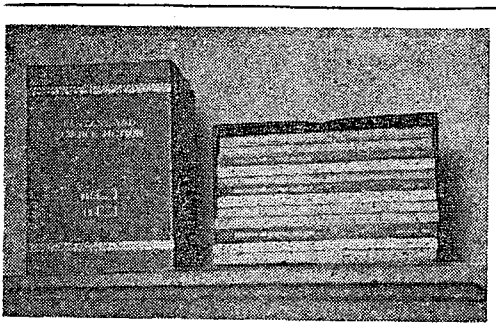
A flick of light, no more,
A pin-point on a photographic plate,
A foot-note in an alien chart of stars
Forgotten soon on miles of dusty shelves
Where alien beetles feed.
A meal for worms,
Sole epitaph
To mark the curious end of restless man,
Who for a second of galactic time
Floated upon a speck of cosmic dust
Around a minor sun.

ROSSER REEVES



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The fourth in Brian W. Aldiss' "Hothouse" series, "Timberline" continues the odyssey of Gren and Yattmur and the tummy-bellies—members of the almost vanished, five-inch-high human race living in a vegetation-dominated world of the remote future.

TIMBERLINE

by Brian W. Aldiss

A BREEZE BLEW OVER THE ocean as bright and sharp as glass.

To the eyes of the great birds that occasionally soared overhead, the boat with its six human passengers looked like nothing more than a drifting log. The log was not sufficient to distract the birds from their high courses. Winging about their own business, they did not sink to sea level to gather more detail.

A sail of large and crudely stitched leaves hung from an improvised mast; but adverse winds had long since torn it, robbing it of usefulness. In consequence the boat now moved without control and was carried eastwards on a strong thermal current.

The humans watched with either apathy or anxiety, according to their natures, as they were swept along.

Much lay on either side for them to see when they cared to look. To port ran a long coastline, presenting from this distance an unbroken aspect of forest on its cliffs. Throughout countless watches it had remained the same; when hills appeared inland, they too were clothed in forest.

Between coast and boat, small islands sometimes interposed themselves. On these was a variety the mainland lacked, some being crowned by trees, some being covered in strange blossoms, some remaining mere barren humps of rock. Sometimes it appeared that the boat would be dashed against the shoals that fringed these islands, but so far it had always been carried clear at the last moment.

To starboard stretched the infinite ocean. This became increasingly punctuated by evil-looking shapes to whose nature the humans had as yet no clue.

The helplessness of their posi-

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tion, as well as the mystery of it, bore down on the humans, though they were used to a subordinate place in the world. Now to add to their troubles a mist came up, closing round their boat and hiding all landmarks from them.

"It's the thickest mist I have ever seen," Yattmur said, as she stood with her mate Gren staring over the side of the boat.

"And the coldest," Gren said. "Have you noticed what is happening to the sun?"

In the gathering mist, nothing now could be seen except the sea immediately about the boat and a great red sun which hung very low over the water in the direction from which they had come, dangling a sword of reflected light across the waves.

Yattmur pressed more tightly to Gren.

"The sun used to be high above us," she said. "Now the watery world threatens to swallow it."

"Morel, what happens when the sun goes?" Gren asked. He formed the question in his head, for he was speaking to a brain fungus which nestled in his hair and stood in a ruff about his neck. This parasitic growth, having dropped on him in the forests of the hothouse world, had been his companion for a long while now, advising him in danger only to lead him into more.

For without the morel fungus to provide him with motivation, Gren would merely have been one of the anonymous band of arboreal creatures that mankind had become. In these centuries when the earth's long day of existence shaded at last into afternoon, the vegetable kingdom had taken over the world. Basking in the radiations of a sun slowly building up to nova, plant life in a million forms had usurped the roles of other forms of life. All animals, almost all insects, all humans bar a scattering—and those small and powerless—had long since been drowned into extinction by the rising tide of verdure.

"When the sun goes, there is darkness," twanged the morel, adding with gentle irony, "as you might have deduced for yourself. We have entered the realm of eternal sunset and the stream carries us deeper and deeper into it."

It spoke reservedly, yet a tremor ran through Gren at the fear of the unknown. He held more tightly to Yattmur as they stared fixedly at the sun, dull and huge through the moisture-laden air. As they watched, one of the phantom shapes they had observed to starboard intervened between them and the sun, taking a great jagged bite out of it. Almost at the same time, the mist thickened and the sun was lost to view.

"Ohhh! Ahhh!" At the sun's disappearance, a cry of dismay rose from the other four members of

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the boat's 'crew.' They had been huddled together on a pile of dead leaves in the stern. Now they came scampering forward, seized Gren's and Yattmur's hands.

"O mighty masters!" they cried. "All this mighty watery world sailing is too much badness, too much badness, for we have sailed away and lost all the world. The world has gone by bad sailing and we must quickly good-sail to get it back."

They were plump creatures, covered in long hair that now glistened with moisture, their eyes rolling. To Gren and Yattmur they were known as the tummy-belly men. Jolted out of their apathy, they bounced up and down, crying their woes.

"Some creature has eaten the sun, O great herder!"

"Stop your silly noise," Yattmur said. "We are as frightened as you are."

"No, we are not," Gren exclaimed angrily, dashing their clammy hands from his flesh. "Nobody could be as frightened as they are, for they are always frightened. Stand back, you blubbering tummy-bellies! The sun will come again when the mist clears."

"You brave, cruel herder," one of the creatures cried. "You have hidden the sun to scare us because you love us no more, though we happily enjoy your lovely blows and happy good bad words! You—"

Gren struck out at the man, glad to relieve his tensions in action. The poor fellow reeled backwards squealing. His companions fell on him instantly, cuffing him for not enjoying the mighty hurts with which his master honored him. Savagely, Gren pulled them away.

As Yattmur came to his aid, a sudden shock sent them all reeling. The deck canted sharply, and they sprawled together, six of them in a heap. Splinters of sharp transparent stuff showered onto them.

Unhurt, Yattmur picked up a shard of the stuff and looked at it. As she watched it, the shard changed, dwindled, and left only a tiny puddle of water in her hand. She stared up in surprise. A wall of the same glassy substance loomed over the front of the boat.

"Oh!" she said dully, realizing they had struck one of the phantom shapes they had noticed riding along on the sea. "A mountain of fog has caught us."

Gren had jumped up, silencing the loud protestations of the tummy-belly men. A gash was visible in the bow of their flimsy boat, though only a trickle of water ran through the hole. He climbed onto the side and peered about.

The warm current had carried them into a great glassy mountain that appeared to float on the sea. The mountain had been eroded at

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water level, so that a sloping shelf had formed; it was up this cold beach that they had been driven; it was this slope that kept their broken bow partly above the water.

"We shan't sink under the surface," Gren said to Yattmur, "for there is a ledge under us. But the boat is useless now. Once off the ledge, it would sink."

It was indeed filling steadily with water, as the wails of the tummy-bellies testified.

"What can we do?" Yattmur asked.

Doubtfully, Gren looked about. The glassy mountain half surrounded them, and hung over them. A great row of what resembled long sharp teeth hung over the deck as if about to bite the ship in two. Cold droplets of saliva fell from them, splashing the humans. They had sailed straight into this glass monster's mouth!

Near at hand, its entrails were dimly visible, filling their vision with an array of blue and green lines and planes, some of which—with a dull murderous beauty—glowed orange from a sun still hidden from the humans.

"This ice beast prepares to eat us!" yelped the tummy-bellies, scampering round the deck. "Oh, oh, our death moment come hot upon us, ice cold!"

"Ice!" exclaimed Yattmur. "Yes! How strange that these foolish belly-boy fishers should give us knowledge. Gren, this stuff is called ice. In the marsh grounds near Long Water where the tummies lived grew little flowers colderpolders. At certain times these flowers, which flourish in the shade, made this cold ice to keep their seed in. When I was a girl-child I went into the marshes to get these ice drops and suck them."

"Now this big ice drop sucks us," Gren said, as cold water soused down on his face from overhead. "What do we do, morel?"

"There is no safety here, so we must look for some," twanged the morel. "If the boat slips back off the ice shelf, all will drown but you, for the boat will sink and you alone can swim. You must get off the boat at once."

"Right! Yattmur, sweet, climb out onto the ice while I drive these four fools after you."

The four fools were loath to leave the boat, though half of its deck was now shallowly under water. When Gren shouted at them, they leapt away, scattering as he approached, dashing away as he rushed to seize them, dodging and squealing as they went.

"Save us! Spare us, O herder! What have we four poor filthy lumps of *compost* done that you should wish to throw us to the ice beast? Help, help! Alas, that we should be so nasty you love to treat us in this way!"

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Savagely, Gren dived at the nearest and hairiest, who skipped away screaming.

"Not me, great beastly spirit! Kill the other three that don't love you, but not me who loves you—"

Gren tripped him as he fled. The tummy-belly man sprawled, his sentence turning into a squeal before he pitched at full length head first into the water. Quickly Gren was on him; they splashed in the icy water until Gren got a firm hold and dragged the spluttering creature up by the flesh and hair of his neck, to pull him by sheer force to the side of the boat. With a heave, he sent him sprawling over, to collapse crying in the shallows at Yattmur's feet.

Thoroughly cowed by this display of force, the other three tummy-bellies climbed meekly out of their refuge and into the maw of the ice beast, teeth chattering with fear and cold. Gren followed them. For a moment the six stood together, looking into a grotto which to four of them at least was a gigantic throat. A ringing noise from behind stopped them.

One of the ice fangs hanging overhead had cracked and fallen. It stuck upright in the wood of the deck for a moment before slipping sideways and shattering into bits. Almost as if this were a signal, a much louder noise came from under the boat; the whole shelf on which the vessel rested had given way. Momentarily, the edge of a thin tongue of ice shot into view. Before it had slumped back into the water, their boat was borne away on the dark flood. They watched it filling rapidly as it disappeared.

They were able to follow its progress for some while; the mist had lifted slightly and the sun once again painted a streak of cold fire down the back of the ocean.

For all that, it was with profound gloom that Gren and Yattmur turned away. With their boat gone, they were stranded on the iceberg. In silence the four tummy-bellies followed them as they took the only course possible and climbed along the cylindrical tunnel in the ice.

Splashing through chill puddles, they were hemmed in by ribs of ice, against which every sound threw itself in a frenzy of echoes. With each step they took, the noise grew louder and the tunnel smaller.

"O spirits, I hate this place! Better if we had perished with the boat. How much further can we go?" Yattmur asked, as Gren paused.

"No further," he said grimly. "We've come to a dead end. We're trapped here."

Hanging nearly to the floor, several magnificent icicles barred their way almost as effectively as a portcullis. Beyond the portcullis, a flat pane of ice faced them.

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"Always trouble, always difficulty, always some fresh trouble to living!" Gren said. "Man was an accident on this world or it would have been made better for him!"

"I have already told you that your kind was an accident," twanged the morel.

"We were happy till you started interfering," Gren said sharply. "You were a vegetable till then!"

Infuriated by this thrust, Gren grasped one of the great icicles and pulled. It snapped off some way above his head. Holding it like a spear, he hurled it at the wall of ice before him.

Painful carillons sparked down the tunnel as the entire wall shattered under the blow. Ice fell, broke, skidded past their ankles like glass mice: as a whole half-melted curtain celebrated its downfall in swift disintegration. The humans crouched, holding their hands over their heads while it seemed as if the whole iceberg was collapsing round them.

When the din died, they looked up—and found through the gap ahead a whole new world awaiting them. The iceberg, caught in an eddy to the coastward side of the warm current, had come to rest against a rocky islet where, held in the arms of a small bay, it was now weeping down into water again.

Though the isle looked far from hospitable, the humans drank in with relief the sight of the sparse green on it, at flowers clinging to it, and at seed pods towering in the air at the top of tall stalks. Here they could rest and find something other than fish to eat. Here they could enjoy the feeling of ground underfoot that did not heave perpetually.

Even the tummy-bellies momentarily took heart. With small happy cries they followed Yattmur and Gren round a ledge of ice, eager to be beneath those flowers. Without too much protest, they jumped over a narrow gulf of deep blue water, to land on protruding rock and thus to scramble safely ashore.

The islet was certainly no paradise. Broken rock and stone covered the crown of it. But in its smallness lay advantage: it was too tiny to support the larger sort of vegetable menaces that flourished on the mainland; with the smaller menaces, Gren and Yattmur could cope. To the disappointment of the tummy-bellies, no tummy-belly tree grew here to which they could attach themselves. To the morel's disappointment, none of his kind grew here; much though he wished to take control of Yattmur and the tummy-bellies, as well as Gren, his bulk was as yet too small to allow him to do this, and he was counting on allies to help him. To the disappointment of Gren and Yattmur, no humans lived here

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with whom they could join forces.

As compensation, a spring of pure water surged out of the rock, larking among the big tumbled stones which covered much of the islet. First they heard its music, then they saw it. The little stream cascaded down onto a strip of beach and so to sea. With one rush, they ran along the sand to it, drinking there without waiting to gain a less brackish draught higher up.

Like children, they forgot their cares. When they had drunk too much and belched sufficiently, they plunged into the water to bathe their limbs, although the chill of it did not tempt them to stay there for long.

So they lived and were content. In this realm of eternal sunset, the air was cool. They devised themselves better body covering from leaves or trailing moss, wrapping the latter tightly round their bodies. Mists and fogs swallowed them from time to time; then the sun would shine again, low over the sea. Sometimes they would sleep, sometimes would lie on the sunward-facing rocks idly eating fruit while watching the icebergs sail by, groaning as they passed.

The four tummy-belly men built themselves a crude shelter a distance apart from Gren and Yattmur. During one sleep it collapsed on top of them. After that they slept in the open, huddled together under leaves as close to their masters as Gren would allow.

Being happy again was good. When Yattmur and Gren made love together, the tummy-bellies would jump about and hug each other with excitement, praising the agility of their clever, clutching master and the sandwich lady.

Huge seed pods grew and clattered overhead. Underfoot ran vegetable equivalents of lizards. In the air fluttered cordate butterflies with wide wings that lived by photosynthesis. Life continued without the punctuation of nightfall or sunrise. Sloth ruled; peace reigned.

The six humans would have merged contentedly into this general pattern had it not been for the morel.

"We cannot stay here, Gren," it said on one occasion, when Gren and Yattmur had woken from a comfortable sleep. "You have rested enough and been well refreshed. Now we must move again, to find more humans and establish our own Kingdom."

"You speak nonsense, morel. Our boat is lost. We must always remain on this island. Chilly it may be, yet we have seen worse places. Let us stay here in content."

He and the girl were splashing naked through a series of pools which had formed among the big square blocks of stone on the crown of the islet. Life was sweet

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and idle, Yattmur kicked her pretty legs and sang one of her herder's songs: he was loath to listen to that dreary voice in his head. More and more it came to represent something he disliked.

Their silent conversation was interrupted by a squeal from Yattmur.

Something like a hand with six bloated fingers had seized her ankle. Gren dived for it and pulled it away without difficulty. It struggled in his hand as he examined it.

"I'm silly to make a noise," Yattmur said. "It is just another of those creatures that the tummy-bellies have named crawlpaws. They swim out of the sea onto land. If the tummy-bellies catch them, they split them open and eat them. They are tough but sweet to taste."

The fingers were grey and bulbous, wrinkled in texture and extremely cold. They flexed slowly as Gren held them. Finally he dropped it onto the bank, where it quickly scuttled off into the grass.

"Crawlpaws swim out of the sea and burrow into the ground. I've watched them," Yattmur said. Gren made no answer.

"Does anything trouble you?" she asked.

"No," he said flatly. He sank stiffly to the ground, almost like an oldman. Though she was uneasy, she stifled her apprehensions and returned to the bathing place. Yet from that time on she was aware of Gren drawing away from her and becoming more closed in on himself; and she knew the morel was to blame for it.

Gren woke from their next communal sleep to find the morel already restless in his mind.

"You wallow in sloth. We must *do* something."

"We are content here," replied Gren sulkily. "Besides, as I have said, we have no boats to get us to the big land."

"Boats are not the only way of crossing seas," said the fungus.

"Oh morel, cease being clever before you kill us with it. Leave us in peace! We're happy here."

"Happy, yes! You would grow roots and leaves if you could. Gren, you do not know what life is for! I tell you that great pleasures and powers await you if you only let me help you stretch out for them."

"Go away! I don't know what you mean."

He jumped up as if to run away from the morel. It gripped him tight, rooting him to the spot. Gathering strength, he concentrated on sending waves of hatred at morel—uselessly, for its voice continued in his head.

"Since it is impossible for you to be my partner, you must suffer being my slave. The spirit of enquiry is all but dead in you; you

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will respond to orders but not to observation."

"I don't know what you are saying!" He cried the words aloud, waking Yattmur, who sat up and gazed mutely at him.

"You neglect so much!" said the morel. "I can see things only through your senses, yet I take the trouble to analyze and find what is behind them. You can make nothing from your data, whereas I can make a lot. Mine is the way to power. Look about you again! Look at the stones over which you climb so carelessly."

"Go away!" Gren cried again. Instantly he doubled up in anguish. Yattmur came running over to him, holding his head and soothing him. She peered into his eyes. The tummy-bellies came up silently to stand behind her.

"It's the magic fungus, isn't it?" she said.

Dumbly he nodded. Phantoms of fire chased themselves over his nerve centres, burning a tune of pain through his body. While the tune continued he could scarcely move. At length it passed. Limply he said, "We must help the morel. He wishes us to explore these rocks more carefully."

Trembling in every limb, he rose to do what was commanded of him. Yattmur stood with him, sympathetically touching his arm.

"When we've explored, we will catch fish in the pool and eat them with fruit," she said, with a woman's talent for producing comfort when it was needed.

He flashed her a humble look of gratitude.

The big stones had long been part of the natural landscape. Where the brook ran among them they were buried in mud and pebbles. Grass and sedge grew on them, deep earth covered them in many places. In particular, here prospered a crop of the flowers that bore their seed pods aloft on tall stalks, which the humans had seen from the iceberg; these Yattmur had casually named the Stalkers, without realizing until much later how appropriate the title was.

Over the stones ran the roots of the Stalkers, like so many lengths of petrified snake.

"What a nuisance these roots are," grumbled Yattmur. "They grow everywhere!"

"The funny thing is the way the roots from one plant grow into another as well as into the ground," Gren said, answering abstractedly. He was squatting by a branch of two roots, one of which ran back to one plant, one to another. After they had joined, they curled over a block of stone and down into an irregular gap between other stones to the earth.

"You can get down there. You will come to no harm," said the morel. "Scramble down between the stones."

A hint of that painful tune

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sprang again over Gren's nerves.

He scrambled down between the blocks as he was directed, nimble as a lizard for all his reluctance. Feeling cautiously, he discovered that they rested on other blocks below, and those on other blocks further below. They lay loosely. By twisting his body he was able to slide himself down between their smooth cool planes.

Yattmur climbed after him, showering down a gentle rain of dirt onto his shoulders.

After crawling down the depth of five blocks, Gren reached solid ground. Yattmur arrived beside him. Now they were able to move horizontally, half squashed between the walls of stone. Attracted by a lessening in the darkness, they squeezed along to a large space, large enough for them to stretch out their arms.

"The smell of cold and dark is in my nostrils and I am afraid," Yattmur said. "What has your morel made us come down here for? What has he to tell of this place?"

"He is excited," Gren replied, unwilling to admit that the morel was not communicating with him.

Gradually they began to see more clearly. The ground above had fallen away to one side, for the source of light was the sun, shining in horizontally between the piled stone, sending a thin ray probing there. It revealed twisted metal among the blocks, and an aperture ahead of them. In the collapse of these stones long ago, this gap had remained. Now the only living things here beside themselves were stalker roots, twisting down into the soil like petrified serpents.

Obeying the morel, Gren scrabbled in the grit at his feet. Here was more metal and more stone and brick, most of it immovable. Fumbling and tugging, he managed to pull out some broken bits of guttering; then came a long metal strip as tall as himself. One end of it was shattered; on the rest of it was a meaningless series of separate marks arranged to form a pattern:

OWRINGHEE

"That is writing," wheezed the morel, "a sign of man when he had power in the world, uncounted ages ago. We are on his tracks. These must once have been his buildings. Gren, climb forward into the dark aperture and see what else you can find."

"It is dark! I cannot go."

"Climb forward, I tell you!"

Shards of glass glinted dully by the aperture. Rotted wood fell away all round it as Gren put a hand forward to steady himself. Plaster showered down on his head as he climbed through. On the other side of the aperture was a drop; Gren slid down a slope of rubble into a room, cutting himself on glass as he went.

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From outside, Yattmur gave a squeak of alarm. He called back softly to reassure her, pressing a hand to his heart to steady it. Anxiously he stared about in the all-but-blackness. Nothing moved. The silence of the centuries, thick and cloying, lay here, lived here, more sinister than sound, more terrible than fear.

For a spell he stood frozen, until the morel nudged him.

Half the roof had collapsed. Metal beams and brick made a maze of the room. To Gren's untutored eye, everything was indistinguishable. The ancient smell of the place choked him.

"In the corner. A square thing. Go there," ordered the morel, using his eyesight to advantage.

Reluctantly, Gren picked his way across to the corner. Something scuttled from under his feet and out the way he had come; he saw six thick fingers, and recognized a crawlpaw like the one that had seized Yattmur's ankle. A square box three times his height loomed over him, its front surface marked by three protruding semi-circles of metal. He could reach only the lowest of these semi-circles, which, the morel instructed him, were handles, He tugged at it obediently. It opened the width of a hand, then stuck.

"Pull, pull, pull!" twanged the morel.

Growing savage, Gren pulled till the whole box rattled, but what the morel termed the drawer would come no further. Still he pulled, while the tall box shook. Something was dislodged from the top of it. From high above Gren's head, an oblong thing came crashing down. As he ducked, it fell to the floor behind him, sending up a cloud of dust.

"Gren! Are you all right? What are you having to do down there? Come out!"

"Yes, yes, I'm coming! Morel, we'll never open this stupid box thing."

"What's this object that nearly hit us? Examine it and let me see. Perhaps it is a weapon. If we could only find something to help us . . ."

The thing that had fallen was thin, long, and tapered, like a flattened burnurn seed. It seemed to be composed of a material with a soft surface, not cold like metal. The morel pronounced it to be a container. When it found that Gren could lift it with comparative ease, it became excited.

"We must carry this container to the surface," it said. "You can pull it up between the stones. We will examine it in daylight and find what it contains."

"But how can the thing help us? Will it get us to the mainland?"

"I didn't expect to find a boat down here. Have you no curiosity? This is a sign of power. Come

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on, move! You are as stupid as a tummy-belly."

Smarting under this gross insult, Gren scrambled back up the debris to Yattmur, shivering patiently in the semi-dark. She clutched him, but would not touch the yellow case he carried. For a moment they whispered together, pressing each others' genitals to gain strength; then they struggled up between the layers of tumbled stone back to daylight, dragging and pushing the container with them.

"Phooo! Daylight tastes sweet!" Gren muttered as he levered himself up the last block. As they emerged bruised and cut into the misty air, the tummy-bellies came scampering up, their tongues lolling out in relief. Dancing round their masters, they raised a hullabaloo of complaint and reproach at their absence.

"Kill us please, pretty cruel master, before you jump again into the lips of the earth! Stab us with wicked killing before you leave us alone to fight unknown frights alone!"

"Your bellies are too fat for you to have squeezed down that crevice with us," Gren said, ruefully examining his wounds. "If you're pleased to see us, why not get us some food?"

When Yattmur and he had bathed their cuts and bruises in the stream, he turned his attention to the container. Squatting over it carefully, he turned it about several times. There was a strangeness about its symmetry that alarmed him. Evidently the tummy-bellies felt the same.

"That very bad strange shape for touching is a strange bad touching shape," one of them wailed, dancing up and down. "Please only do a touching for throwing it into the splashing watery world." He clung to his companions, and they peered down in a silly excitement.

"They offer you sensible advice," said Yattmur, but with the morel urging him, Gren sat down and took the container between feet and fingers. While he examined it, he felt the fungus snatch at his impressions as soon as they arrived in his brain; shivers ran along his spine.

On the top of the container was one of the patterns that the morel called writing. This one resembled

HECKLER or HECKLER

depending on which way you looked at it, and was followed by several lines of similar but smaller patterns.

He began to tug and push at the container. It did not open. The tummy-bellies quickly lost interest and wandered away. Gren himself would have flung the thing aside, had the morel not kept him at it, poking and pressing. As he ran his fingers along

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one of the longer sides, a lid flipped open. He and Yattmur looked askance at one another, then peered down at the object in the container, squatting in the dirt and gaping with awe.

The object was of the same silky yellow material as its container. Reverently, Gren lifted it out and placed it on the ground. Releasing it from the box activated a spring; the object, which had been wedge-shaped to conform to the dimensions of its resting place, suddenly sprouted yellow wings. It stood between them, warm, unique, perplexing. The tummy-bellies crept back to stare.

"It's like a bird," Gren breathed. "Can it really have been made by men like us and not grown?"

"It's so smooth, so . . ." Words failing, Yattmur put out a hand to stroke it. "We will call it Beauty."

Age and the endless seasons had puckered its container; the winged thing remained as new. As the girl's hand ran over its upper surface, a lid clicked back, revealing its insides. Four tummy-belly men dived for the nearest bush. Fashioned of strange materials, of metals and plastics, the insides of the yellow bird were marvellous to behold. Here were small spools, a line of knobs, a glimpse of amplifying circuits, a maze of cunning intestines. Full of curiosity, the two humans leant forward to touch. Full of wonder, they let their fingers—those four fingers with opposed thumb that had taken their ancestors so far—enjoy the delight of toggle switches.

The tuning knobs could be twiddled, the switches clicked!

With scarcely a murmur, Beauty rose from the ground, hovered before their eyes, rose above their heads. They cried with astonishment, they fell backwards, breaking the yellow container. It made no difference to Beauty. Superb in powered flight, it wheeled above them, glowing richly in the sun.

When it had gained sufficient altitude, it spoke.

"Make the world safe for democracy!" it cried. Its voice was not loud but piercing.

"Oh, it speaks!" cried Yattmur, gazing up in delight at the flashing wings.

Up came the tummy-bellies, running to join in the excitement, falling back in apprehension, when Beauty flew over them, standing baffled as it circled round their heads.

"Who rigged the disastrous docking strike of '31?" Beauty demanded rhetorically. "The same men who would put a ring through your noses today. Think for yourselves, friends, and vote for SRH—vote for freedom!"

"It—what is it saying, morel?" Gren asked.

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"It is talking of men with rings through their noses," said the morel, who was as baffled as Gren. "That is what men wore when they were civilized. You must try to learn from what it is saying."

Beauty circled round one of the tall stalkers and remained overhead, buzzing slightly and emitting an occasional slogan. The six humans, feeling they had gained an ally, were greatly cheered; for a long while they stood with their heads back, watching and listening. The tummy-bellies beat their stomachs in delight at its antics.

"Let us go back and try to unearth another toy," Yattmur suggested.

After a moment's silence, Gren replied, "The morel says not. He wants us to go down when we do not want to; when we want to go, he does not. I do not understand."

"Then you are foolish," grumbled the morel. "This circling Beauty will not get us ashore. I want to think. We must help ourselves; especially I wish to observe these stalker plants. Keep quiet and don't bother me."

It did not communicate with Gren for a long while. He and Yattmur were free to bathe again in the pool, and wash the underground dirt from their bodies and hair, while the tummy-bellies lolled near at hand, scarcely complaining, hynotized by the yellow bird that circled tirelessly above them. Afterwards, they hunted over the ridge of the islet, away from the tumbled stones; Beauty wheeled above them, following, occasionally crying "The SRH and a two-day working week!"

Bearing in mind what the morel had said, Gren took more notice than before of the stalker plants. Despite their strong and interlinked root structure, the actual flowers were of a lowly order, though, canted towards the sun, they attracted the cordate butterflies. Beneath five bright and simple petals grew a disproportionately large seed pod, a sexfid drum from each face of which protruded gummy and fringed bosses resembling sea anaemones.

All this Gren observed without interest. What happened to the flowers on fertilization was more sensational. Yattmur was passing one of them when a treebee bumbled past her and landed on the blossom, crawling over its pistil. The plant responded to pollination with violence. With an odd shrilling noise, flower and seed drum rocked up skywards on a spring that unravelled itself from the drum.

Yattmur dived into the nearest bush in startlement, Gren close behind. Cautiously they watched; they watched the spring unwind more slowly now. Warmed by the sun, it straightened and dried into

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a tall stalk. The six-sided drum nodded in sunlight, far above their heads.

For the humans, the vegetable kingdom offered no wonders. Anything that held no menace held little interest. They had already seen these stalkers, waving high in the air.

"Statistics prove that you are better off than your bosses," Beauty said, flying round the new pole and returning. "Be warned by what happened to the Bombay Interplanetary Freight Handlers' Union! Stand up for your rights while you have them."

Only a few bushes away, another stalker rattled up into the air, its stalk straightening and gaining rigidity.

"Let's get back," Gren said.

As he spoke, the morel clamped down on him. He staggered and fought, then fell over into a bush, sprawling in pain.

"Gren! Gren! What is it?", Yattmur gasped, running to him, grasping his shoulders.

"I-I-I-" He could not get the words out of his mouth. A blue tinge spread from his lips outward. His limbs went rigid. Within his head, the morel was punishing him, paralyzing his nervous system.

"I've been too gentle with you, Gren. You're a vegetable! I gave you a warning. In future I will do more commanding and you will do more obeying. Though I do not expect you to think, you can at least observe and let me do the thinking. Here we are on the fringe of finding something valuable about these plants, and you turn stupidly away. Do you want to rot forever on this rock? Now lie still and watch, or I'll visit you with cramps, like *this!*"

Painfully, Gren rolled over, burrowing his face in grass and dirt. She lifted him up, crying his name in sorrow at his hurt.

"It's this magic fungus!" she said, looking with distaste at the hard glistening crust that ringed his neck. Her eyes filled with tears. "Gren, my love, come along. Another mist is blowing up. We must get back to the others."

He shook his head. Again his body was his own—for the present at least—and the cramps died from it, leaving his limbs weak.

"The morel wants me to remain here," he said faintly. Tears of weakness stood in his eyes. "You go back to the others."

Distressed, she stood up. She twisted her hands in anger at their helplessness.

"I'll be back soon," she said. The tummy-bellies had to be looked after. They were almost too stupid even to eat by themselves unless directed. As she picked her way back down the slope, she whispered aloud, "O spirits of the sun, banish that magic fungus of cruelty and guile before he kills my dear lover."

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Unfortunately the spirits of the sun looked particularly weak. A chill wind blew from the waters, carrying with it a fog that obscured the light. Close by the island sailed an iceberg; its creaking and cracking could be heard even when it had disappeared phantom-like into the fog.

Half hidden by bushes, Gren lay where he was, watching. Beauty hovered overhead, faint in the gathering mist.

A third stalker had rocked upwards, squealing as it went. He watched it straighten out, more slowly than its partners now the sun was hidden. The mainland was lost to view. A butterfly fluttered past and was gone; he remained alone on an uncharted mound, rolled up in a universe of watery obscurity.

Distantly, an iceberg groaned, its voice echoing drably across the ocean. He was alone, isolated from his kind by the morel fungus. Once it had filled him with hopes and dreams of conquest; now it gave him only a feeling of sickness; but he knew no way of ridding himself of it.

"There goes another," the morel said, deliberately breaking into his thought. A fourth stalker had sprung up from the rock nearby. Its bulging case loomed above them, hanging like a decapitated head on the dirty wall of fog. A breeze caught it, bumping it against its neighbour. The anaemone-like protruberances stuck against each other, so that the two cases remained locked, swaying quietly on their long legs.

"Ha!" said the morel. "Keep watch, man, and don't worry. These blooms are not separate plants. Six of them with their communal root structure go to make up one plant. They have grown from the six-pronged tubers we have seen. You watch and you'll see the other two flowers of this particular group will be pollinated in a short while."

Something of his excitement passed to Gren, warming him as he lay hunched among cold stones; staring and waiting because he could do nothing else, he let an age go by. Yattmur returned to him, threw over him a mat the tummy-bellies had plaited, and lay beside him almost without speaking.

At last a fifth stalker flower was pollinated and rattled startlingly upward. As its stalk straightened, it swayed against one of its neighbours; they joined, nodded onto the other pair as they did so, and then locked, so that a single and a bundle of four now stood high above the humans' heads.

"What's it mean?" Yattmur asked.

"Wait," Gren whispered. Scarcely had he spoken when the sixth and last fertilized drum headed up towards its brothers.

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Quivering, it hung in the mist awaiting a breeze; the breeze came; with hardly a sound, all six drums locked into one solid body. In the shrouded air, it resembled a hovering creature.

"Can we go now?" Yattmur asked.

Gren was shivering.

"Tell the girl to fetch you some food," twanged the morel. "You are not leaving here yet."

"Are you going to have to stay here forever?" she asked impatiently, when Gren passed on the message.

He shook his head. He didn't know. Impatiently she vanished into the mist. A long while passed before she returned, and by then the stalker had taken the next step in its development.

During its protracted stillness, the fog parted slightly. Horizontal rays of sun struck its body, staining it bronze. As if encouraged by the slight additional warmth, the stalker moved one of its six stalks. The bottom of it snapped free from the root system and became a leg. The movement was repeated in each of the other legs. One by one they came free. As the last one was liberated, the stalker turned and began to move. Oh, it was unmistakeable, the seed cases on stilts began to walk downhill, slowly but sturdily.

"Follow it," the morel twanged.

Climbing to his feet, Gren began to move in the wake of the thing, walking as stiffly as it did. Yattmur followed quietly by his side. Overhead, the yellow machine also followed.

The stalker happened to take their usual route to the beach. When the tummy-bellies saw it coming, they ran squealing into the bush for safety. Unperturbed, the stalker kept straight on, jabbed its way delicately through their camp, and headed for the sand.

Nor did it pause there. It stalked into the sea until little but its lumpy six-part body was above the water. Slowly it disappeared, swallowed by mist as it waded in the direction of the coast. Beauty flew after it, uttering slogans, only to return in silence.

"You see!" exclaimed the morel, sounding so noisily inside Gren's skull that he clutched his head. "There lies our escape route, Gren! These stalkers grow here, where there is room for their full development, then go back onto the mainland to seed themselves. And if these migratory vegetables can get ashore, they can take us with them!"

The stalker seemed to sag a little at its metaphorical knees. Slowly, as if rheumatism had it tight by those long joints, it moved its six legs, one by one, and with long vegetable pauses between each move.

Gren had had trouble getting

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the tummy-belly men into position. The tummy-bellies had no understanding of past or future, indeed they seemed in their vagueness to confuse the two—recalling that one had been full of trouble, they 'recalled' that the other would be so—a conclusion many sharper minds might have reached by less addled reasoning. To the tummy-bellies, the isle was the present, something to be clung to even in the face of blows, rather than exchange it for some imagined future bliss.

"We can't stay here: the food will probably give out," Gren told them, as they cowered before him.

"O herder man, gladly we obey you with yesses. If food is all gone here, then we go away with you on a stalk-walker over the watery world. Now we eat lovely food with many teeth and do not go away till it is all gone."

"It will be too late then. We must go now, while the stalkers are leaving."

Fresh protests, with much slapping of buttocks in anguish.

"Never before have we seen the stalker-walkers to take a walk with them when they go stalking-walking. Where were they then when we never saw them? Terrible herder man and sandwich lady, not you two people without tails find this care to go with them. We don't find the care. We don't mind ever not to see the stalker-walkers stalky-walking."

Gren did not confine himself to verbal argument for long; when he resorted to a stick, the tummy-bellies were quickly persuaded to acknowledge the truth of his reasoning and to move accordingly. Snuffling and snorting, they were driven towards a group of six stalker flowers, the buds of which had just opened. They grew together on the edge of a low cliff overlooking the sea.

Under the morel's direction, Yattmur and Gren had spent some while collecting food, wrapping it in leaves and attaching it with brambles to the stalker seed drums. Everything was ready for their journey.

The four tummy-bellies were forced to climb onto four drums. Telling them to hold on tightly, Gren went among them one by one, pressing his hand into the floury centre of each blossom. One by one, the seed cases shrilled into the air, noisily accompanied by a passenger hanging on for his life.

Only with the fourth case did anything go wrong. That particular flower was tilted towards the edge of the cliff. As the spring uncurled, the extra weight on the pod bore it sideways rather than upwards. It sagged over, an ostrich with a broken neck, and the tummy-belly yelled and kicked as his heels swung in mid-air.

"O mummy! O tummy! Help your son!," he cried, but there was no help. He lost his grip. Amid a

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shower of provisions he fell, still protesting, an ignoble Icarus into the sea. The current carried him away.

Freed of its burden, the fourth stalker drum swayed upright, buffetted the three already erect, and joined with them into a solid unit.

"Our turn!" Gren said, turning to Yattmur.

Yattmur was still gazing out to sea. He grasped her arm and pushed her over to the two unsprouted flowers. Without showing anger, she freed herself from his grip.

"Do I have to beat you like a tummy-belly?" he asked her.

She did not laugh. He still held his stick.

When she did not laugh, his hold on the stick tightened. Obediently, she climbed onto the big green stalker drum.

They clutched the ribs of the plant, churning a hand about the pistil of the flower. Next minute, they too were spiralling up into the air. Beauty flew about them, begging them not to let vested interests prosper. Yattmur felt most horribly afraid. She fell face forward among pollen-coated stamens, almost unable to breathe for the scent of the flower, but incapable of moving. Dizziness filled her.

A timid hand touched her shoulder.

"If you have a making hungry by the fear, do not eat of the nasty stalker flower but taste good fish without walking legs we clever menchaps catch in a pool!"

She looked up at the tummy-belly, his mouth moving nervously, his eyes large and soft, a dust of pollen making his hair ludicrously fair. He had no dignity. With one hand he scratched his crotch, with the other offered her fish.

Yattmur burst into tears.

Dismayed, the tummy-belly crawled forward, putting a hairy arm over her shoulder.

"Do not make too many wet tears to fish when fish will not hurt you," he said.

"It's not that," she said. "It's just that we have brought so much trouble to you poor fellows—"

"O we poor tummy men all lost!" he began, and his two companions joined in a dirge of sorrow. "It is true you cruelly bring us so much trouble."

Gren had been watching as the six cases joined into one lumpy unit. He looked anxiously down to catch the first signs of the stalker detaching its legs from its root system. Now the chorus of lament made him switch his attention.

His stick landed loudly across plump shoulders. The tummy-belly who had been comforting Yattmur drew back crying. His companions also shrank away.

"Leave her alone!" Gren cried savagely, rising to his knees. "You filthy hairy tummy-tails, if you

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touch her again I'll throw you down to the rocks!"

Yattmur peered at him with her lips drawn back so that her teeth showed. She said nothing.

Nobody spoke again until at last the stalker began to stir with a purposeful movement.

Gren felt the morel's combination of excitement and triumph as the tall-legged creature took its first step. One by one its six legs moved. It paused, gaining its balance. It moved again. It halted. Then again it moved, this time with less hesitation. Slowly it began to stalk away from the cliff, across the islet, down to the gently shelving beach where its kin had gone, where the ocean current was less strong.

Without hesitation, it waded into the sea. Soon its legs were almost entirely immersed, and the sea slid by on all sides.

"Wonderful!" Gren exclaimed. "Free of that hateful island at last."

"It did us no harm. We had no enemies there," Yattmur replied. "You said you wanted to stay there."

"We couldn't stay here forever." Contemptuously, he offered her only what he had said to the tummy-bellies.

"Your magic morel is too glib. He thinks only of how he can make use of things—of the tummies, of you and me, of the stalkers. But the stalkers did not grow for him. They were not on the island for him. They were on the island before we came. They grow for themselves, Gren. Now they do not go ashore for us but for themselves. We ride on one, thinking ourselves clever. How clever are we? These poor fisher-bellies call themselves clever, but we see they are foolish. What if we are also foolish?"

He had not heard her speak like this. He stared at her, not knowing how to answer her until irritation helped him.

"You hate me, Yattmur, or you would not speak like that. Have I hurt you? Don't I protect you and love you? We know the tummy-bellies are stupid, and we are different from them, so we cannot be stupid. You say these things to hurt me."

Yattmur ignored all these irrelevancies. She said sombrely, as if he had not spoken, "We ride on this stalker but we do not know where it is going. We muddle its wishes with our own."

"It is going to the mainland, of course," Gren said angrily.

"Is it? Why don't you look about you?"

She gestured with a hand and he did look.

The mainland was visible. They had started towards it. Then the stalker had entered a current of water and was now moving directly up it, travelling parallel

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with the coast. For a long while, Gren stared angrily, until it was impossible to doubt what was happening.

"You are pleased!" he hissed.

Yattmur made no reply. She leant over and dabbled her hand in the water, quickly withdrawing it. A warm current had carried them to the island. This was a cold current the stalker waded in, and they moved towards its source. Something of that chill found its way up to her heart.

"Don't let yourselves drift!" Beauty called, swooping low over their heads. "Progress cannot be achieved without bloodshed. Think of your wives at home and what a Tripartite victory would mean to them. Get to the source of the matter and vote for Imra Imbroglio!"

The icy water flowed by, bearing icebergs. The stalker kept steadily on. Once it became partially submerged and its five passengers were soaked; even then its pace did not alter.

It was not alone. Other stalkers joined it from other islands off the coast, all heading in the same direction. Evidently this was their migratory time when they made for unknown seedbeds. Some of them were bowled over and broken by icebergs; the others continued.

From time to time the humans were joined on their raft-like perch by crawlpaws similar to the ones they had encountered on the island. Grey with cold, the tuberous hands hauled themselves up out of the water, fumbling about for a warm place, scuttling furtively from one nook to another. One climbed onto Gren's shoulder. He flung it disgustedly far out to sea.

The tummy-bellies complained little about these visitors climbing coldly over them. Gren had rationed their food as soon as he realized they would not be getting ashore so quickly as expected, and they had withdrawn into apathy. Nor did the cold improve matters for them. The sun seemed about to sink into the sea, while a chill wind blew almost continuously. Once hail pounded down on them out of a black sky, almost skinning them as they lay defenceless.

To the least imaginative among them it must have seemed that they were taking a journey into nowhere. The frequent fog banks that rolled up round them increased that impression; and when the fogs lifted they saw on the horizon ahead a line of darkness that threatened and threatened and never blew away. But the time came when at last the stalker swerved from its course.

Huddled together in the centre of the seed cases, Gren and Yattmur were roused from sleep by the chatter of the three tummy-bellies.

"The watery wetness of the

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watery world leaves us cold tummy-belly men by going dripping down long legs! We sing great happy cries, for we must be dry or die. Nothing is so lovely as to be a warm dry tummy-chummy chap, and the warm dry world is coming to us."

Irritably, Gren opened his eyes to see what the excitement was about.

Truly, the stalker's legs were visible again. It had turned aside from the cold current and was wading ashore, never altering its inflexible pace. The coast, covered thickly with the great forest, was near now.

"Yattmur! We're saved! We're going ashore at last!" It was the first time he had spoken to her in a long while.

She stood up. The tummy-bellies stood. The five of them, for once united, clasped each other in relief. Beauty flew overhead crying, "Remember what happened to the Dumb Resistance League in '45! Speak out for your rights. Don't listen to what the other side are saying—it's all lies, propaganda. Don't get caught between Delhi bureaucracy and Communist intrigues. Ban Monkey Labour now!"

"Soon we will be dry good chaps!" cried the tummy-bellies.

"We'll start a fire going when we get there," said Gren.

Yattmur rejoiced to see him in better spirits, yet a sudden wave of misgiving urged her to ask, "How do we get down off here?"

Anger burnt in his eyes as he stared at her, anger at having his elation punctured. When he did not immediately reply, she guessed he was consulting the morel for an answer.

"The stalker is going to find a place to seed itself," he said. "When it finds a place, it will sink to the ground. Then we shall get off. You do not need to worry; I am in command."

She could not understand the hardness of his tone. "But you aren't in command, Gren. This thing goes where it will and we are helpless. That is why I worry."

"You worry because you are stupid," he said.

Although she was hurt, she determined to find all the possible comfort she could in the circumstances.

"We can all worry less when we get ashore. Then perhaps you will be less unkind to me."

The shore, however, did not extend them a particularly warm invitation. As they looked towards it hopefully, a pair of large black birds rose from the forest. Spreading their wings, they sailed upwards circling, hovered, and then began to beat their way heavily through the air towards the stalker.

"Lie flat!" Gren called, drawing his knife.

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"Boycott chimp goods!" Beauty cried. "Don't allow Monkey Labour in your factory. Support Imbroglio's Anti-Tripartite scheme!"

The stalker was trampling through shallow water now.

Black wings flashed low overhead, thundering with a whiff of decay across the stalker. Next moment, Beauty had been snatched from its placid circling and was being carried coastwards in mighty talons. As it was borne off, its cry came back pathetically, "Fight today to save tomorrow. Make the world safe for democracy!" Then the birds had it down among the branches.

With water draining from its slender shanks, the stalker was now wading ashore. Four or five of its kind could be seen doing or about to do the same thing. Their animation, their human-like appearance of purpose, set them apart from the dreariness of their surroundings. The brooding sense of life that impregnated the world Gren and Yattmur had previously known was lacking entirely in these regions. Of that hothouse world, only a shade remained. With the sun lolling on the horizon like a bloody eye upon a marble slab, twilight prevailed everywhere. In the sky ahead, darkness gathered.

From the sea, life seemed to have died. No monstrous seaweeds fringed the shore, no fish stirred in the rock pools. This desolation was emphasized by the shuddering calm of the ocean, for the stalkers—prompted by instinct—had chosen for their migration a season without storms.

On the land, a similar quietude reigned. The forest still grew, yet it was a forest stunned by shadow and cold, a forest half alive, smothered in the blues and greys of perpetual evening. As they moved above its stunted trunks, the humans looked down to see mildew speckling its foliage. Only at one point did a touch of yellow show brightly. A voice called to them, "Vote SRH today, the democratic way!" The heckler machine lay like a broken toy where the birds had left it, with one wing visible amid the tree tops; it called still as they trudged inland, out of earshot.

"When do we stop?" Yattmur whispered.

Gren did not answer; nor did she expect an answer. His face was cold and fixed; he did not even glance towards her. She dug her nails into her palm to keep her anger back, knowing the fault was not his.

Picking their way with care, the stalkers moved above the forest, leaves brushing against their legs or occasionally sweeping their bodies. Always the stalkers marched with the sun behind them, leaving it half-hidden beneath a wilderness of sour foliage. Always they marched towards the

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darkness that marked the end of the world of light. Once a flock of the black vegbirds rose from the treetops and clattered away towards the sun; but the stalkers never faltered.

Despite their fascination, their growing apprehension, the humans eventually had to resign themselves to eating more of their rations. Eventually, too, they had to settle to sleep, huddling up closely at the centre of their perch. And still Gren would not speak.

They slept, and when they woke, coming reluctantly back to the consciousness that was now associated with cold, the view about them had changed—though hardly for the better.

Their stalker was crossing a shallow valley. Darkness stretched beneath them, though one ray of sun lit the vegetable body on which they rode. Forest still covered the ground, a distorted forest that now resembled the newly blind who stagger forward with arms and fingers extended, fright apparent in every feature. Here and there a leaf hung, otherwise the limbs were naked, contorting themselves into grotesque forms as the great solitary banyan tree that had over the ages turned itself into a whole hothouse jungle fought to grow where it had never been intended to grow.

The three tummy-bellies were shuddering with alarm. They were looking not down but ahead.

"O tummies and tails! Here comes the swallowing-up place of all night forever. Why did we not sadly happily die long long ago, when we were all together, and sweating together was juicily nice so long ago?"

"Be quiet, the pack of you!" Gren shouted, grasping his stick. His voice rang hollow and confused to his ears as it was thrown back by the valley.

"O big little tailless herder, you should have been kind and killed us with killing cruelly long when we could sweat. Now here comes the black old end of the world to chop its jaws over us. Alas the happy sunshine, O poor us!"

He could not stop their cries. Ahead lay the darkness, piled up like layers of slate.

Emphasizing that mottled blackness was one small hill. It stuck up uncompromisingly before them, bearing the weight of the night on its shattered shoulders. Where the sun struck its upper levels it had a golden touch, the world's last colour of defiance. Beyond it lay obscurity. Already they were climbing its lower slopes. The stalker toiled upwards into light; stretched out across the valley, five more stalkers could be seen, one near, four more half lost in murk.

The stalker was labouring. Yet it climbed up into the sunshine and continued on without pause.

The forest too had come

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through the valley of shadow. For this it had fought its way through that gloom: to be able to fling its last wave of greenery up the last strip of lit ground. Here, on slopes looking back towards the ever-setting sun, it threw off its blights to grow in something like its old exuberance.

"Perhaps the stalker will stop here," Yattmur said. "Do you think it will, Gren?"

"I don't know. Why should I know?"

"It *must* stop here. How can it go any further?"

"I don't know, I tell you. I don't know."

"And your morel?"

"He does not know either. Leave me alone. Wait to see what happens."

Even the tummy-bellies fell silent, staring about them at the weird scene in mingled fear and hope.

Without giving any indication that it ever meant to stop, the stalker climbed on, creaking up the hill. Its long legs continued to pick a safe course through the foliage, until it dawned on them that wherever it intended to go it was not stopping here on this last bastion of light and warmth. Now they were at the brow of the hill, yet still it marched, an automatic vegetable thing they suddenly hated.

"I'm going to jump off!" Gren cried, standing up. Yattmur, catching the wildness in his eyes, wondered whether it was he or the morel that spoke. She wrapped her arms round his thighs, crying that he would kill himself. With his stick half lifted to strike her, he paused—the stalker, unpausing, had commenced to climb down the unlit side of the hill.

Just for a moment the sun still shone on them. They had a last glimpse of a world with gold in the dull air, a floor of black foliage, and another stalker looming up on their left flank. Then the shoulder of the hill shrugged upwards, and down they jolted into the world of night. With one voice they gave forth a cry: a cry that echoed into the unseen wastes about them, dying as it fled.

For Yattmur only one interpretation of events was possible. They had stepped out of the world into death.

Dumbly she buried her face into the soft hairy flank of the nearest tummy-belly. From what seemed remote distance came Gren's voice, little of what he was saying being intelligible. Nor did she try to understand it, until the steadily continued jolting of the stalker persuaded her that she had not entirely lost company with the things that were.

"I can't understand what you say," she muttered.

Gren's voice stopped. It began its explanation again in broken formless sentences.

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"This world is fixed with one half always turned towards the sun . . . no axial revolution to provide . . . moving into the night side . . . across the terminator . . . line beyond which trees cannot grow, known as the timberline, beyond which—"

"Gren! Gren! Stop it!" she cried. So meaningless was it, she could not bear to listen.

His teeth were chattering. As he ceased speaking, she realized the morel had been forcing the words from his mouth. She clasped him, opening her eyes for the first time to search for sight of his face.

In the darkness it floated, a ghost of a face from which she nevertheless drew comfort. Gren put his arms round the girl, so that they crouched there together with cheeks touching. The posture gave her warmth and courage enough to peer furtively around.

She had visualized in her terror a place of reeling emptiness, imagining that perhaps they had fallen into some cosmic sea shell washed up on the mythical beaches of the sky. Reality was less impressive and more nasty. Directly overhead, a memory of sunlight lingered, illumining the vale into which they plodded. This light was split by a shadow that grew and grew across the sky and was projected by the black ogre's shoulder down which they were still climbing.

Their descent was marked by thudding sounds. Peering down, Yattmur saw that they travelled through a bed of writhing worms. The worms were lashing themselves against the stilt legs of the stalker, which now moved with great care to avoid being thrown off balance. Glistening yellow in the stramineous light, the worms boiled and reared and thudded in fury. Some of them were tall enough to reach almost to where the humans crouched, so that as their heads flickered up on a level with Yattmur's, she saw they had bowl-like receptors at their tips. Whether these receptors were mouths, or eyes, or organs to catch what heat there was, she could not say. But her moan of horror roused Gren from his trance; almost cheerfully he set about tackling terrors which he could comprehend, lopping off the squidgy yellow tips as they flicked out of the murk.

The stalker over to their left was also in trouble. Though they could see it only dimly, it had apparently walked into a patch where the worms grew taller. Silhouetted against a bright strip of land to the far side of the hill, it had been reduced to immobility, while a forest of boneless fingers boiled all round. It toppled. Without a sound it fell, the end of its long journey marked by worms.

Unaffected by the catastrophe, the stalker on which the humans

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rode continued to edge downwards.

Already it was through the thickest patch of opposition. The worms were rooted to the ground and could not follow. They fell away, grew shorter, more widely spaced, finally sprouted only in bunches, which the stalker avoided.

Relaxing slightly, Gren and Yattmur took the opportunity to look more searchingly at their surroundings.

A quantity of rock and stones thick on the ground below suggested a reason for the cessation of worms. This detritus had been shed by an ancient river which no longer flowed; the old river bed marked the bottom of a valley; when they crossed it, they began again to climb, over ground free of any form of growth.

"Let us die!" moaned one of the tummy-belly men. "It is too awful to be alive in the land of death. Turn all things the same, great herder, give us the benefit of the cutting of your cosy and cruel little cutting sword. Let tummy-bellies men have a quick short cutting to leave this long land of death! O, O, O, the cold burns us, ayeee, the long cold cold!"

In chorus they cried their woe.

Gren let them moan. At last, growing weary of their noise, which echoed across the valley, he lifted his stick to strike them. Yattmur restrained him.

"Are they not right to moan?" she asked. "I would rather moan with them than strike them, for soon it must be that we shall die with them. We have gone beyond the world, Gren. Only death can live here."

"We may not be free, but the stalkers are free. They would not walk to their death. You are turning into a tummy-belly, woman!"

For a moment she was silent. Then she said, "I need comfort, not reproach."

Gren made no answer. The stalker moved steadily over rising ground. Lulled by the threnody of the tummy-bellies, Yattmur fell asleep. Once the cold woke her. The chant had ceased; all her companions were sleeping. A second time she woke, to hear Gren weeping; but lethargy had her, so that she succumbed again to tiring dreams.

When she roused once more, she came fully awake with a start. The dreary twilight was broken by a shapeless red mass apparently suspended in the air. Gasping between fright and hope, she shook Gren.

"Look, Gren!," she cried, pointing up ahead. "Something burns there! What are we coming to?"

The stalker quickened its pace, almost as if it had scented its destination.

In the near-dark, seeing ahead was baffling. They had to stare for

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a long while before they could make out what lay in front of them. A ridge stretched immediately above them; as the stalker made its way up to the ridge, they saw more and more of what it had hitherto obscured. Some way behind the ridge loomed a mountain with a triple peak. It was this mountain that glowed so redly.

They gained the ridge, the stalker hauled itself stiffly over the lip, and the mountain was in full view.

No sight could have been more splendid.

All about, night or a pale brother of night reigned supreme. Even in the sky, very little reminder of the sun remained. Nothing stirred; the chilly breeze moved with stealth through the valleys unseen about them, like a stranger in a ruined town at midnight.

If they were not beyond the world, as Yattmur thought, they were beyond the world of vegetation. Utter emptiness courted utter darkness below their feet, magnifying their least whisper to a stammering shriek. But from all this desolation rose the mountain, high and sublime; its base was lost in blackness; its peaks soared high enough to entice the sun, to fume in rosy warmth, to throw a reflection of that glow into the wide trough of obscurity at its foot.

Taking Yattmur's arm, Gren pointed silently. Other stalkers had crossed the darkness they had crossed; three of them could be seen steadily mounting the slopes ahead. Even their aloof and eerie figures mitigated the loneliness.

Yattmur woke the tummy-bellies, keen to let them see the prospect. The three plump creatures kept their arms round each other as they gazed up at the mountain.

"O the eyes make a good sight!" they gasped.

"Very good," Yattmur agreed.

"O very good, sandwich lady! This big chunk of ripe day makes a hill of a hill shape to grow in this night-and-death place for us. It is a lovely sun slice for us to live in as a happy home."

"Perhaps so," she agreed, though already she foresaw difficulties beyond their simpler comprehensions.

They climbed. It grew lighter. Finally they emerged from the margin of shadow. The blessed sun shone on them again. They drank the sight of it until their eyes were blinded and the sombre valleys beneath them danced with orange and green spots. Compressed to lemon shape and parboiled crimson by atmosphere, it simmered at them from the ragged lip of the world, its rays beating outwards over a panorama of shadow. Being broken into a confusing array of searchlights by a score of peaks thrusting up from the blackness, the lowest strata of sunlight made a pattern of gilt wonderful to behold.

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Unmoved by these vistas where gold chafed the petrified ocean of dark, the stalker continued immutably to climb, its legs creaking at every step. Beneath it scuttled an occasional crawlpaw, heading down towards the shrouded valley and ignoring their progress upward. At last the stalker came to a position almost in the dip between two of the three peaks. It halted.

"By the spirits!" Gren exclaimed. "I think it means to carry us no further."

The tummy-bellies set up a hullabaloo of excitement, but Yattmur looked round doubtfully.

"How do we get down?" she asked.

"We must climb down," Gren said, after some thought, when the stalker showed no further sign of moving.

"Let me see you climb down first. With the cold, and with crouching here too long, my limbs are as stiff as sticks."

Looking defiantly at her, Gren stood up and stretched himself. He surveyed the situation. Since they had no rope, they had no means of getting down. The smoothly bulging skins of the seed drums prevented the possibility of their climbing down onto the stalker's legs. Gren sat again, lapsing into blankness.

There they waited. There they ate a morsel more of their food, which had begun to sprout mould. There they had perforce to fall asleep; and when they woke the scene had changed hardly at all, except that a few more stalkers now stood silent further down the slopes, and that thick clouds were drawing across the sky.

Helpless, the humans lay there while nature continued inflexibly to work about them, like a huge machine in which they were the most idle cog.

The clouds came rumbling up from behind the mountain, big and black and pompous. They curdled through the passes, turning to sour milk where the sun lit them. Presently they obscured the sun. The whole mountainside was swallowed. It began to snow sluggish wet flakes like sick kisses.

Five humans burrowed together, turning their backs upwards to the drift. Underneath them, the stalker trembled.

Soon this trembling turned to a steady sway. The stalker's legs sank a little into the moistened ground; then, as they too became softened by wet, they began to buckle. The stalker became increasingly bow-legged. In the mists of the mountainside, other stalkers—lacking the assistance of weight on top of them—began slowly to copy it. Now its legs quivered further and further apart; its body sank lower.

Suddenly, frayed by the countless miles of travel and subverted by wet, its joints reached breaking point and split. The stalker's six legs fell outwards, its body dropped

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to the muddy ground. As it hit, the six drums that comprised it burst, scattering notchy seeds all about.

This sodden ruin in the middle of snow was at once the end and the beginning of the stalker plant's journey. Forced like all plants to solve the terrible problem of overcrowding in a hothouse world, it had done so by venturing into those chilly realms beyond the timberline where the jungle could not grow. On this slope, and a few similar ones within the twilight zone, the stalkers played out one phase of their unending cycle of life. Many of the seeds dispersed now would germinate, where they had plenty of space and some warmth, growing into the hardy little crawlpaws; and some of those crawlpaws, triumphing over a thousand obstacles, would eventually find their way to the realms of true warmth and light, there to root and flower and continue the endless vegetable mode of being.

When the seed drums split, the humans were flung aside into mud. Painfully they stood up, their limbs creaking with stiffness. So thickly swirled the snow and cloud about them that they could hardly see each other: their bodies became white pillars, illusory.

Yattmur was anxious to gather the tummy-belly men together before they became lost. Seeing a figure glistening in the thick dim light, she ran to it and grasped it. A face turned snarling towards her, yellow teeth and hot eyes flared round into her face. She cowered from attack, but the creature was gone in a bound.

This was their first intimation that they were not alone on the mountain.

"Yattmur!" Gren called. "The tummy-bellies are here. Where are you?"

She went running to him, her stiffness forgotten in fright.

"Something else is here," she said. "A white creature, wild and with teeth."

The three tummy-bellies set up a cry to the spirits of death and darkness as Yattmur and Gren stared about.

"In this filthy mess, it's impossible to see anywhere," Gren said, dashing snow from his face.

They stood huddled together, knives ready. The snow slackened abruptly, turned to rain, cut off. Through the last shower they saw a line of a dozen white creatures bounding over a brow of the mountain towards the dark side. Behind them they pulled a sort of sledge loaded with sacks, from one of which a trail of stalker seeds bounced.

A ray of sun pierced across the melancholy hillsides. As if they feared it, the white creatures hurried into a pass and disappeared from view.

Gren and Yattmur looked at each other.

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"Were they human?" Gren asked.

She shrugged. She did not know.

She did not know what human meant. The tummy-bellies, now lying in the mud and groaning—were they human? And Gren, so impenetrable now that it seemed as if the morel had taken him over—could it be said he was still human?

So many riddles, some she could not even formulate in words, never mind answer. . . .

But once more the sun shone warm on her limbs. The sky was lined with crumpled lead and gilt. Above them on the mountain were caves. They could go there and build a fire.

They could survive and sleep warmly again. . . .

Brushing her hair off her face, she began to walk slowly uphill. Her shadow was strong on the ground in front of her, and she knew enough to know that the others would follow her.

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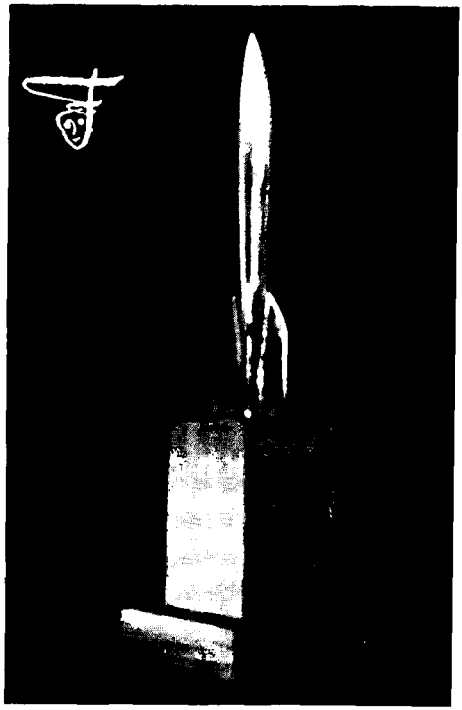

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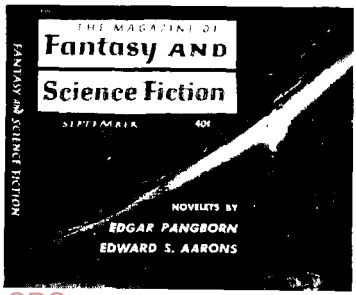

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